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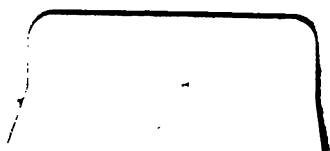
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# A PASSIVE CRIME

AND OTHER STORIES.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "MOLLY BAWN."

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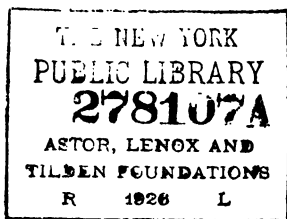
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**A PASSIVE CRIME.**



WILLIAM L. GALE

OF NEW YORK.

## A PASSIVE CRIME.

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE MOMENT APPROACHES.

FROM its site upon the high rocks that overhang the sea, Penruddock Castle, in all its Gothic and somewhat savage grandeur, frowns down upon the vale beneath; upon plain and upland, park and winding stream, and the pretty cottage far below, that lies half-hidden by the spreading foliage.

Although belonging to sunny June, the day is dark and lowering.

The ocean, with a sudden roar, is rushing inland, to break out with furious hisses upon the long, low beach.

The sky is overcast; no faintest gleam of sunshine comes to lighten the gloom, or throw some brightness on the scene, so replete with heaviness and a vague melancholy.

"And such a winter wears the face of heaven," that all the happy birds lie cowering out of sight.

Upon the castle walls the flag waves fretfully in the breeze. A sense of desolation and of coming evil is over all the place. The servants go softly to and fro, as though waiting solemnly for death's messenger, who comes with hurried feet. The moaning winds and drifting clouds murmur of misery, and plainly tell of dawning grief.

Beneath, in the valley, upon the grass plot that belongs to the cottage, a man is walking slowly up and down with lowered head, and a heart filled with envy and vain longing. His face, though handsome and suggestive of good breeding, is dark, stern, and impenetrable. His arms are crossed behind his back. Just now an expression, almost evil, mars the beauty of his features. His thoughts, busy with the past and the present, are full of discontent.

Sometimes, as though unconsciously, he lifts his eyes to gaze upon the crimson flag floating so high above him, marking the spot where his sister-in-law, the lady of Penruddock, lies at the point of death, very certainly to follow her husband into the land of shadows.

Within twelve months they will both lie buried, and all this goodly heritage, these swelling fields and softly undulating plains, will pass into the hands of a child, a feeble girl—a creature scarce fit to combat with the winds that blow; whilst *his* boy, his treasure beyond all price, must through all his life toil for daily bread.

At this moment a merry laugh rings out upon the air, and from the house, with fair hair flying, a lovely boy of seven runs eagerly and joyously, with arms extended, to the man so deep in envious thought.

As the sound of childish gaiety smites upon his ear, his whole expression changes, and he lifts his head, and gladly welcomes the child with word and gesture, as he flings himself, breathless, upon the man's breast.

The boy clings to him, murmuring a joyful story of his escape from nurse and tutor without fear of reproof, and with no dread of the dark features and gleaming eyes above him, that betray some sense of cruelty.

Perhaps his little son is the one thing in all the world that does not shrink from George Penruddock, and is, therefore, doubly dear to him on that account.

He holds him now closely clasped against his heart, as though the contact were sweet to him, and whispers in his ear words of fond endearment that are almost womanish in their tenderness.

Yet even as he holds the youngster in his arms dark thoughts come again, and take fast hold of him.

But for the puny baby in the Castle above, all these lands around him might be the boy's, and wealth and position be assured to him.

That thought it is which is now torturing, and



which has long driven from his heart every feeling save only one that should inspire a human being.

He loves his little son; for him it is that this man is ambitious, and would enrich even by a crime.

The daughter of Alice Penruddock (once so vainly loved, now so long detested) will soon be in possession of all, whilst his little son, his pretty Dick, must for ever remain portionless. It is this thought that constantly tortures, that poisons and lays waste his every hour.

The boy has darted off again, chasing from flower to flower a showy butterfly; and once more Penruddock looks up sharply to where the crimson flag should be. But it is no longer there; and almost it seems as though a faint cry comes to him upon the rising wind.

He shivers, and then cries shame upon his superstitious fears, and tells himself it is but the shriek of the sea-gulls flying inwards from the storm.

The click of a latch makes him turn his head. The garden gate is thrown wide, and a tall woman, of servant's rank, but finely formed, and of the gipsy type, comes hurriedly up to him. Her eyes are peculiarly large and dark, and there is a determination, a stolidity, about her lower jaw somewhat remarkable. Perhaps the touch of Romany blood is rather more discernible in carriage and complexion

than in eyes and hair, though both are dark as midnight.

Penruddock grows a little pale as she approaches, and acknowledges her presence, not with speech, but by a slight gesture of the hand.

The woman takes no notice of his greeting, but, drawing herself up to her full height, for several moments gazes at him thoughtfully.

"Well?" he asks, at length, as though unable longer to endure her scrutiny.

"My lady is dead!" says the woman, slowly, rather than curtly, and with a difficulty which is very apparent to him.

Penruddock starts, and moves back a step or two. However prepared we may be for such news, the plain telling of it must occasion a shock.

"Ay," says the woman, quietly.

"Dead!" says Penruddock, in a low tone. "So soon—so very suddenly!"

"Yes, it is always so," returns she, moodily, gazing at the green sward; "the young and the gay go soonest. She is clay now, though a week ago she could chatter with the best; nay, so lately as an hour ago she called me by my name, and held my hand—so. I can feel the pressure still. But it is all over, all over; she is still and cold now, poor soul! And it may be happier, for her heart was broken!"

"How dreadful it all is—how depressing! I feel it as though——"

"No more, Penruddock," says the woman, suddenly, raising her head, and flinging up her hand with an uncontrollable and almost haughty gesture. So standing, she is quite beautiful; and though wearing the garb, loses all the aspect of the menial. "Hypocrisy is a vile sin; and why try to deceive *me*? There was no love lost between you. Even at the last, the very last, when life was nearly over, she——"

There is a pause, and Penruddock, in an agitated voice, says, with some excitement, "Go on! Do not hesitate—tell me the worst, Esther! At the last she spoke of me! What was it? Did she forgive?"

"Never!" says the woman, firmly. "No, not even then. You know how she disliked the master's will, and your being left sole guardian of the child in the event of her death. *I* say nothing," slowly, and with averted looks. "The dislike may have been—nay, must"—with a curious contraction of the brows—"have been unreasoning, but still it was there; and at the last she alluded to it. As I knelt beside her she laid her hand on mine, and whispered a few words. They were not many, but they were of you and the child. If you command that I should speak those words, of course, I must; but better not hear them, sir——"

"Speak, woman!" replies he, roughly. "What

could she say of me in death that would be harsher than that which she said in life?"

"Nay, then, if you *will* hear, of course, you must," returns she; yet she pauses as though somewhat reluctant to proceed. "It always seemed to her a strange thing that Miss Penruddock (the little one) should by the will be compelled to live here in this small spot until her eighteenth birthday, when in reality she is mistress of *it*, and all the lands around, and the great castle up yonder."

"Tell me what she said of me as she died?" says Penruddock, impatiently.

"She mentioned no names, but bending towards me, said, with her poor eyes wild and frightened, as it were, 'Now that I am torn, and for ever, alas! from my sweet lamb, she must walk beside the *wolf*!'"

"Ah!" says Penruddock, drawing his breath quickly, and colouring darkly; "is that the truth, or is it only that which you have yourself invented?"

"It is true. You would have me speak. But"—lowering her head—"it may have been but raving. When death is near, how few know light from darkness!"

"What more did she say?" demanded he, as though deaf to her last remark.

"She made me swear that I would never forsake the little one; that as I had been its nurse for three

long years, so I would still cherish and keep a watchful eye upon her. I swore it," says the woman, solemnly, raising her eyes to the dull sky above her, as though in memory of her "oath in heaven;" "and I shall never break that promise, come what will, and cost me what it may to keep it."

She pauses then, and looks keenly at Penruddock, who meets her gaze as firmly as though his heart was frank and true, his mind without a single thought of evil.

"When will it please you, sir, that I shall bring the child down?" she asks, presently, in a subdued tone. "This evening? Already she pines for her dead mother, poor bairn; but if with Master Dick, I think the feeling of loneliness might be lightened, and, no doubt, in a very little time would cease to exist altogether."

"Very well. Let her be sent this evening," says Penruddock, slowly, unwillingly, as it seems to the ears of his attentive listener.

"Perhaps I hurry you?" she says, with a certain new-born nervousness in her manner. "It is too hasty an arrival. There will be our sleeping-room to arrange, and the preparations for it may——"

"There need be no trouble," says Penruddock, slowly. "There is nothing to arrange. My niece can sleep in the nursery with Wilkins."

"Miss Penruddock always sleeps with me, in my room," says the woman, growing terror in her eyes.

"Wilkins is nothing to her; I am all the world to her."

"For the future many things will be changed," says Penruddock, speaking coldly and with singular precision. "It is better you should understand at once that your services in this family will no longer be required. My son's nurse will be sufficient for both children."

The woman's face alters as he speaks until it is almost unrecognisable.

A gray, leaden pallor discolours her lips; her eyes grow strangely dark.

By a supreme effort, she so far controls herself as to speak with some appearance of calmness.

"You would separate me from the child?" she says, in a low, anguished tone.

Her hands are clasped behind her back, well out of sight, lest he shall see how the fingers, closing on each other, leave white marks upon the knuckles.

"Yes; it will be better so. I shall keep no one near my niece who may prejudice her against her uncle," replies he, with a slight sneer; "her guardian, too, according to her father's wish."

She makes a quick gesture, as though she would dispute the insinuation; but he prevents her.

"It is useless arguing," he says. "Your manner betrays you. It is distrustful, and touches on insolence. From your mistress you have, I know but

too well, imbibed a hatred of me strong as it is unjust."

The woman, pale now as death, makes a step forward.

"I was her nurse," she says, desperately. "She is like my own—nay, more to me than the one I lost. All through her young life I have borne with her, cared for her, loved her. She is part of myself. At this bosom"—crossing her hands passionately upon her breast—"she was fed. She is all on earth I care for—my *last* tie. And will you now compel me to part with her? Penruddock, have pity!"

"I have spoken," returns he, unmoved; "and tragic scenes have no charm for me. I shall give you a character, and any wages that are due you can have whenever it may suit you to come for them."

"Then it is all over!" murmurs she, faintly, pressing her hand to her heart, and turning away.

But when she has gone a yard or two, she comes back again, and confronts him with a look upon her handsome face ill to meet.

She is very white, and her large, unearthly eyes burn with a revengeful fire.

"I had forgotten," she says, slowly. "My lady sent you one more message. 'Tell him,' she said, 'that surely *he* shall be dealt with as he deals with *mine!*'"

So saying, she moves away into the leafy recesses of the wood, and presently is lost to sight.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE GUARDIAN.

JULY is come. The hot sun pouring down its scorching rays on tree and drooping flower, on waving meadow, and the cool and smiling river, with its "water, clear as beryl or crystal," that, flowing through the cottage garden, rushes onward to the illimitable ocean.

Amongst the great roses, heavy with scent and bloom, the children are playing merrily, chasing each other in and out, and hither and thither, through countless rows of gaudy-coloured beds.

Hilda Penruddock, the little heiress, with her yellow locks and pleasing countenance, fair as an angel's, and eyes, "coloured with the heavens' own blue," is racing madly over walks and closely-shaven grass, looking like some "milk-white blossom of the spring."

Her cousin, tall and slender for his age, and handsome as an Italian cherub in spite of his golden-brown hair, is swiftly pursuing her, whilst merry laughter from both their lips ascends into the summer air.

"Ah, take care, Hilda!" calls the boy, as his



cousin runs dangerously close to the deep shelving bank that overhangs the river. "Do not lean over. You know how strictly nurse has forbidden it."

"The river is shining—shining!" cries she. "See the little stars that dance on the top of it, and the pretty white lilies! I wish I had a lily!"

"Come away," returns he, coaxingly, "and I will get you prettier lilies from the lake outside by-and-by. Come, let us finish our game. Now, I am the robber chief, and you are my prisoner, and this is my castle."

Penruddock, sitting in the oriel window of the library that looks out upon the garden, watches the children at their play with moody brow and lips compressed.

Upon Hilda more especially his gaze is fixed. What a frail life—a mere breath, as it were—to stand between his and (what is far more to him) the boy's advancement!

That this baby should inherit what, but for her unwelcome birth, would by law have been his, embitters and makes wretched every moment of his life.

What a little, fragile thing she looks, flitting about in the sunshine, in spite of her merry laugh and joyous disposition—a thread that might be easily snapped!

Yet how slow is the great King of Terrors in claiming those whom we would wish away—how

swift to clutch at those we would give our heart's blood to retain!

At this moment he sees the children leaning over the bank (perpendicular and utterly unprotected), at the base of which the water runs so rapidly.

The boy's warning to stand back comes to him upon the air.

What if the child, stooping *too* far, should overbalance herself, and sink into the foaming depths beneath—swollen with last night's rain—and be carried onward to the cruel ocean? Whose fault would it be? Who would be to blame? Such accidents happen very frequently.

Idly the awful thought presents itself, bearing with it a fascination hard to combat. Heart and brain it fills, to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

Meantime, Hilda has stopped short, and in her shrill, sweet treble has ordered Dick to go indoors and bring her out the dolly that shall represent another unhappy captive to his powerful and daring arm.

Dick, engrossed in the reality of his game, departs for the fresh prey, nothing loth, leaving her alone in the quiet garden, with no eye upon her save his who watches with disfavour her every movement.

At first, when left alone, she stands, her little finger in her mouth, as though uncertain what next

to do. Then a butterfly, blue as the skies above her, crossing her path, she gives chase, and runs until it is beyond her reach, and she herself is once more close to the fatal bank before described.

She is singing softly a little gay song all about that silly Bo-peep of ancient memory, and the song is borne inwards, even to the ears of Penruddock, as he sits behind the curtains, cold and motionless, waiting for he hardly knows what.

Whatever fiendish thought has taken possession of him, he is, as yet, scarcely aware of it, but tarries, with white lips and distended eyes, that follow eagerly and glaringly each footstep of the child outside.

Hilda, with all the youthful longing for forbidden fruit, gazes eagerly down upon the water-lilies that are rocking to and fro on the disturbed breast of the agitated river.

Stooping over, she examines them minutely, longingly, her eyes intense, a faint smile of pleasure on her lips.

Presently, kneeling down, she suspends half her small body over the sloping bank, as though to gain a nearer knowledge of the coveted flowers.

Penruddock, shrinking back, with one hand grasps the curtains, and trembling violently, whilst great drops of dew lie thick upon his forehead, that already in anticipation seems red with the cursed brand of Cain.

Eagerly he gazes on the little one. She is barely balanced; the slightest touch, the faintest motion may send her over into the river.

Prompted, it may be, by his good angel, he makes a step forward, as though to stay the catastrophe so imminent. Then he suddenly stops.

A wretched memory that but belongs to his vile desire comes to him, and crushes all good within him.

Has he not somewhere heard that to speak, or call, or cry aloud to a child when in a dangerous position is but a swift and sure means to cause its sudden destruction? Therefore will *he* not speak.

And, as though virtuous feeling alone prompts him, he holds his peace, and tries to believe that his non-interference may yet save the child.

Yet in reality, and he knows it well, he does not so believe. No, he cannot so deceive himself.

The little heiress creeps still nearer to the brink, always with her soft and tender song upon her lips.

She sways suddenly, seeks to recover herself, and then the poor baby—filled with her childish longing for the unattainable, and with all her little soul wrapt in admiration of the fatal lilies—falls forward.

For a moment she clings convulsively to the slippery bank, then, with a sharp and bitter scream, rolls downward, and is instantly snatched to the

bosom of the greedy river as it rushes onward to the sea.

The whole awful tragedy has occupied scarcely more than one short minute.

Penruddock, rousing himself when it is too late, springs through the window, out into the garden, past the roses—that still smile and tremble coquettishly beneath the touch of the fickle breeze, as though no horrible thing had just been done—and gains the fatal spot.

Gazing with wild and too late remorse into the river, he fails to see sign of white frock, or whiter limbs, or small face pale with terror.

The river has caught the little body, and hurried it along, past the curve of the rock, through the meadow, perhaps already—so deadly swift it is—out into the open sea. No tiny, struggling mass, still instinct with life, can be seen—nothing but the turbid waters.

Penruddock, with a groan, sinks upon his knees, and falling each second lower, soon lies prone, an inert and unconscious heap upon the grass.

How long he remains there, prostrate, and mercifully lost to time, he never knows, but a voice, sweet and loving, rouses him to life again.

“What is it, papa?” says Dick, bending over him. “Are you ill? You will catch cold, so get up. Nurse is always saying that Hilda and I are sure to catch sore throats if we lie on the grass.”

As the little one's name passes his boy's lips, Penruddock starts and shivers, and after a few seconds, by a supreme effort, raises himself to his feet.

Never shall the boy know how evil has been this deed he has committed.

He moves very feebly indeed towards the house; but Dick follows him.

"Where is Hilda?" he asks, standing on tiptoe, to bring his face nearer to his father's. "I can't find her anywhere, and I left her just here. She is a little imp, and is always hiding from me; but she will come back when I want her. Hilda," raising his voice to a shout, "I shall pick the eyes out of Miss Maud" (the doll) "if you don't come soon. One would think she was *dead*, she is so silent. Why, papa, how pale you are!—and how ill you look! Has anyone been vexing you?"

"No," says Penruddock, harshly; and pushing the boy, for the first time, roughly from him, goes in-doors.

Many years afterwards, Dick Penruddock remembers how that day his father, for the only time in all his life, treated him harshly, and without the accustomed tenderness.

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## CHAPTER III.

## AT THE OPERA.

It is the height of the London season. All the world is alive and eager in search of amusement, and to-night, as Patti is to sing, each box and stall in the Italian House is filled—overflowing, indeed.

One box alone on the second tier is empty, and towards it numerous lorgnettes from the stalls beneath, and from boxes opposite are anxiously directed.

The Diva has appeared, has sung her first solo, has been rapturously received and applauded to the echo, and the house is now listlessly paying attention to a somewhat overdone tenor, when the door of the empty box opens, and a woman, pretty, and with a charming expression, if slightly *passé*, comes slowly within the light of the lamps.

She is followed by a girl, who, coming to her side, stands for a moment motionless, gazing down and around with a careless calm upon the fashionable multitude with which the vast building is crowded.

So standing together, the elder woman sinks into insignificance, whilst the younger becomes the

centre of attraction. She is of medium height, with a clear, colourless skin, and large blue expressive eyes. Her hair is not golden, but light brown, through which a touch of gold runs brightly. She is aristocratic, almost haughty, in appearance; yet every feature, and, indeed, her whole bearing, is marked with a melancholy that seems to check even the smile that on very rare occasions seeks to dissipate the sadness on her lovely countenance.

She is dressed in a somewhat strange fashion for so young a girl. Her gown is of black satin, relieved by some heavy, golden chains that encircle her neck; she wears black gloves to her elbow, and an enormous black fan flecked with gold. Upon her fair hair a tiny Indian cap of black satin, embroidered with gold, and hung with sequins, rests lightly.

She is whimsical, old-fashioned, what you will, but perfect in every look and movement.

Having completed her slow survey of the house, she turns and says something in quite a languid fashion to her companion, who laughs, taps her with her fan, and motions her to the chair opposite.

"What a success you are, Maud!" says the elder woman, fondly. "Even royalty has taken notice of your entrance! Did you observe that?"

"Royalty, as a rule, is very rude!" says Maud, slowly, after which they both fall into line and turn their attention to the divine Adelina.



Two young men in the stalls beneath, who up to this have been engrossed with the new beauty, at this instant turn to each other.

"Who is she?" asks the youngest, eagerly. "I have been in town some time—quite three weeks—but anything like that has not——"

"Dear child, don't—don't say it!" interrupts his companion, sadly. "It isn't like you! Not to know *her*, argues yourself unknown! I thought better of you! She is our beauty *par excellence*, our modern Venus, and licks everyone else into fits! She is the very cream of the cream where beauty is concerned, though somewhat shady, I am reluctantly compelled to admit, in the matter of birth!"

"Birth!" repeats the young man, with a start. "But look at her—look at her hands, her profile! Who can dispute the question of birth?"

"No one! It is indisputable! That charming girl up there, with the most irreproachable nose, and the haughtiest mouth in Christendom, was picked off the street by her chaperon, Mrs. Neville, when a baby, and is probably—at least, so I hear—the daughter of a woman, poor, but strictly honest—they are *always* strictly honest,—who lived by infusing starch into limp linen! I really don't like to say coarsely that she was a washerwoman, it sounds so vulgar!"

"It sounds as horrible as it is impossible!" says

the younger man, still gazing dreamily at the box that holds his harmony in black and gold.

"Most impossible things are horrible," says his companion, lightly. "They grate; they are out of the common. Perhaps that is their charm. Miss Neville charms. Yes, that is her name; her adopted mother wishes her to be so called. Don't look so excessively shocked, my dear Penruddock; it is rather a romance, if it is anything at all, and should create in your mind interest rather than disgust."

"It is not disgust I feel, it is merely a difficulty of belief!" says Penruddock, vaguely. "Is *that* her adopted mother?" shifting his glasses for just a moment from the calm and beautiful blue eyes that have so bewitched him, to the faded pretty woman who sits near them.

"Yes. *She* is all right, you know—quite correct! She is George Neville's widow, son to Lord Dulmore, you may remember, who broke his neck, or his head, or something—I don't exactly know what—when out hunting."

"Yes; I remember. He was a friend of my father's. By the bye, that Mrs. Neville must be a sort of connection of ours—at least, her sister married my uncle. But all friendship there ceased with my aunt's death. I don't recollect anything about it myself, but I believe a coldness arose after my

poor little cousin's unhappy accident. You heard all about that of course?"

"A very fortunate accident for you, all things considered. Other fellows' cousins don't drop off like that," says Mr. Wilding, in an aggrieved tone.

"My father was awfully cut up about it," says Penruddock; "he has never been the same man since. Moody, you know, and that; and goes about for days together without speaking a word. It preyed upon him. And the Wynters—my aunt's people—said ugly things about it; that sufficient care hadn't been taken of the poor little thing, and all the rest of it. But of course it was nobody's fault."

"Of course not! Some people—especially law relations—are never happy except when making themselves disagreeable! That's their special forte! The fact that your father minds them betrays in him a charming amount of freshness!"

"And so she adopted that lovely girl!" says Penruddock, presently, returning to his contemplation of Beauty's box, and referring to Mrs. Neville.

"She might have done worse, might she not? I shouldn't mind adopting her myself," says Mr. Wilding, genially. "And nobody seems to mind about the linen; she is received everywhere, and has refused several very good men."

"Tell me all about it; do, now, there's a good

fellow," says Penruddock, leaning back in his seat, and beginning to look profoundly interested.

"There isn't much of it. It is a romantic story, certainly, and a very Quixotic one, but it can be told in a word or two. Brevity is the soul of wit. To begin with, you must try to master the fact that Mrs. Neville adores dogs, and driving in the Park one day about fifteen years ago, she drew up her carriage at the railings and proceeded to gratify the appetite of her Pomeranian by bestowing upon him a cracknel.

"Even as she broke it, a faint cry from the world outside her carriage attracted her attention, and glancing up she saw a very lovely child in the arms of a tall, rather peculiar-looking woman. The child was gazing at her imploringly, its little hand extended as though desirous of the biscuit the dog was devouring.

"Mrs. Neville is tender-hearted. The child, as I said, was beautiful; a very model for an angel or a love. Mrs. Neville, who even *now* is nothing if not emotional, gazed entranced; the pretty baby pouted, and cried again for the biscuit. The cry went to her listener's heart.

"‘She is hungry,’ she said, to the woman who leant against the railings in a picturesque attitude.

"‘She is often hungry, madam,’ returned the woman, stolidly, yet far from brutally; indeed, the

apparent hopeless resignation in her tone must have been very perfectly done, from all I have heard.

"Mrs. Neville, an unaccountable pang at her heart, pressed all her remaining biscuits into the baby's hands; told the woman to call upon her next day; heard next day the child was an orphan; and the end of it was, took her to her house and heart, to the intense disgust of numerous nieces and nephews, who had looked on Mrs. Neville as their joint prey. There you have the whole history, I believe."

"It is a very strange story; she must have seen a great many pretty children besides this particular one. Why did she choose her?"

"Fancied she saw in her some resemblance to a dead sister, that was very fondly, and even extravagantly regretted—your aunt, Mrs. Penruddock, I suppose, as she hadn't another sister that I ever heard of."

"If she—the young lady above—is like Mrs. Neville's sister, Mrs. Neville must be very unlike her own people," says the young man, slowly.

"Yet, strange to say, that girl is most absurdly like a portrait of Mrs. Penruddock, that hangs in the small drawing-room in South Audley Street, where Mrs. Neville lives. Not that there is anything so very remarkable in that; one sees chance resemblances every day. But you, being one of the family, should see this likeness yourself."

"No; I have no recollection of aunt. My father and she were always on bad terms with each other during her lifetime, and there is no picture of her at the Castle. The one you mention was sent to Mrs. Neville at her death. I have been so much abroad, that I am quite a stranger to the Wynters, and all their set. You know Mrs. Neville?"

"Intimately; and Beauty, too," with an amused smile. "And every Tuesday afternoon Beauty gives me a cup of tea with her own fair little hands."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Penruddock.

"Yes, indeed; you did not think such bliss could be on this miserable earth, did you? And sometimes, *not often*, I take a nice boy, when I find one, and introduce him to Mrs. Neville."

"Am *I* a nice boy?" asks Penruddock, with a laugh. "Wilding, if you will introduce *me* to Mrs. Neville I shall never forget it to you as long as I live!"

"And a great deal of good that will do me," says Wilding, mildly. "However, I consent, and on Tuesday you shall make your bow to Mrs. Neville, and worship at Beauty's shrine."

"Oh, thank you, my dear fellow, thank you!"

"But one word of warning—don't go and fall in love with her, you know; it wouldn't do at all. I am responsible for you to your father, and it would be the worst possible taste on your part to bring down his condemnation on my head!"

"Do not make yourself unhappy about that," says Penruddock, quietly. "It may be *my* fate to be miserable about Miss Neville—I feel inclined to believe that—but I am not sufficiently vain to flatter myself that she will ever take the trouble to make herself miserable about me."

## CHAPTER IV.

### IN THE ROW.

ALL yesterday the rain fell heavily. Not in quiet showers, but with a steady downpour that drenched the world, rendering the Park a lonely wilderness, and the Ride deserted.

To-day the sun, as though weary of yesterday's inaction, is out again, going his busy round, and casting his warm beams on rich and poor, simple and wise, alike.

The Row is crowded—filled to overflowing with the gaily-dressed throng that has come out to bask in the glad warmth of the sunshine, and revel in the sense of well-being engendered by the softness and sweetness of the rushing breeze.

"The heaven shows lively art and hue,  
Of sundry shapes and colours new,  
And laughs upon the earth!"

A faint languor born of the increasing heat pervades the air,

But for the gentle wind that dances gaily hither and thither, wooing with its tender touch each thing it passes, the heat would be almost insupportable.

The occupants of the chairs seem drowsily inclined, and answer in soft monosyllables those with energy sufficient left to question them.

One old lady, unmindful of the carriages that pass and repass incessantly, has fallen into a sound and refreshing slumber, made musical by snores low but deep.

The very loungers on the railings have grown silent, as though speech is irksome, and conversation not to be borne, and content themselves with gazing upon the beauty that is carried by them as the tide of fashion ebbs and flows.

A dark green victoria, exquisitely appointed, and drawn by two bright bay ponies, claims, and not at all unjustly, the very largest share of attention.

Not so much the victoria, perhaps, as Mrs. Neville, to whom it belongs, and who is now seated in it, with her adopted daughter beside her.

Miss Neville, as usual, is faultlessly attired in some pale fabric, untouched by colour of any sort, and is looking more than ordinarily lovely.

Her large dark eyes, blue as the deep Czar violet, and tinged with melancholy, are in perfect harmony with the cream-coloured hat she wears.



A little suspicion of crimson adorns each cheek.  
Her lips are parted.

She seems indeed a very phantom of delight.

“A lovely apparition, sent——”

not so much to be a moment's ornament as a lasting joy.

“There is Dick Penruddock,” says Mrs. Neville, suddenly. “I want to speak to him.”

Leaning forward, she says something to her coachman, and presently the carriage is drawn up beside the railings, and, with a smile and a nod, Mrs. Neville beckons the young man to her side.

It is quite a month since that night at the Opera, where Penruddock first saw Maud Neville—a month full of growing hopes and disheartening fears.

At first, Mrs. Neville had been averse to the acquaintance altogether, bearing a strange grudge to the very name of Penruddock, as she held it responsible for all the ills that had befallen her beloved sister.

She had scolded Wilding in her harmless fashion as severely as she could scold anyone for having brought one of “those people,” as she termed them, within her doors, more especially the boy who had succeeded to the property that should by right have belonged to the little Hilda, her dead sister's only child.

But time and Dick Penruddock's charm of manner had conquered prejudice and vague suspicion; and Mrs. Neville, after many days, acknowledged even to herself that she liked the young man—nay, almost *loved* him, in spite of his name and parentage.

Just now he comes gladly up to the side of the victoria and takes her hand, and beams upon her, and then glances past her to accept with gratitude the slow bow and very faint smile of recognition that Miss Neville is so condescending as to bestow upon him.

"Such a chance to see you in this confusion!" says Mrs. Neville, kindly. "And can you come and dine to-night? It is short notice, of course, for such a fashionable boy as *you* are; but I really want you, and you *must* come."

"If you really want me, I shall of course come—your wishes are commands not to be disputed," says Penruddock, after a second's hesitation, wherein he has decided on telling a great fib to the other people with whom he is in duty bound to pass his evening. "But your dance——"

"Is later on—yes. But I have two or three old friends coming to dine, and they are very charming, of course, and I quite love them, you will understand; but old friends, as a rule, are just the least little bit tedious sometimes, don't you

think? And I want you to help me with them. I may depend upon you?"

"You may, indeed."

"Ah, so Maud said!" says Mrs. Neville, with a faint sigh of relief.

To know that this pleasant boy will be on the spot to make conversation and carry it on when her own powers fail is an inexpressible comfort to her.

"Did Miss Neville say that? I did not dare to believe that she had so good an opinion of me. To be considered worthy of trust is a very great compliment indeed," says Dick, glancing past Mrs. Neville again, to gaze somewhat wistfully at the owner of the cream-coloured hat.

But she, beyond the first slight recognition and somewhat haughty inclination of her small head, has taken not the slightest notice of him.

She has even turned her head away, and is apparently lost in contemplation of the brilliant and constantly increasing crowd around her.

"Seen the Princess, Miss Neville?" asks Penraddock at length, in despair, filled with a sudden determination to make her speak, and to compel her large, thoughtful eyes to meet his own, if only for a single instant. "Rather nice, her ponies, don't you think?"

"Not so highly bred as Mrs. Cabbe's, nor so perfect in any way," returns Miss Neville, unsym-

pathetically, letting her eyes rest on him for a very brief moment, and making him a present of a grave, pleasant, but cold little smile.

After which she turns her head away again, as though desirous of dropping out of the conversation.

Penruddock is piqued, almost angry. Already he has learned the value of position, money, the world's adulation; yet this girl alone treats him with open coldness and something that borders on positive avoidance, though she herself is utterly without position, and only indebted to the popularity Mrs. Neville enjoys with both sexes for her admittance into society.

Two or three men coming up to the victoria at this moment stay to speak to its occupants, and to all Miss Neville gives the same cold greeting, the same frigid, but undeniably entrancing, smile.

Perhaps her somewhat insolent indifference is her chief charm; or it may be that it lies in the half mournful dignity expressive of an everlasting if silent regret that marks her every glance and movement.

A tall, dark man, pushing his way through the others, makes his bow to Mrs. Neville, and then raises his hat deferentially to the beauty of the hour.

Maud acknowledges his presence with a saluta-

tion that is certainly somewhat colder than those accorded to the others to-day.

"How full the Row is this afternoon!" says Mrs. Neville, genially, who has made the same remark to all the others straight through.

"Is it?" says Captain Saumarez, the new comer. "Really, I daresay; but once I had caught sight of your unapproachable ponies I could see nothing else. It seems too much luck to meet you this afternoon with the certainty of meeting you again this evening. Thanks so much for the card! May I venture to hope for one dance to-night, Miss Neville?—or do I, as usual, ask too late?"

"Quite too late. Every dance is promised."

She barely looks at him as she speaks.

"What, *all*? I am indeed unfortunate—there is no denying that! Is there nobody you could throw over to give me even one poor dance?"

"I never throw over my partners," says Miss Neville, distinctly; "my conscience is opposed to that, and will not allow me to break my word—once given."

"Yet I think—short as is our acquaintance—I remember *one* partner ignominiously consigned to the background for no particular reason," replies he, meaningly.

"Do you?" innocently. "My memory is not my strong point, so I shall not discuss the subject. But,"—with a flash from the violet eyes,—“I think

I may take upon myself to say that you are wrong when you say there was no 'particular reason' for my so acting."

"Unless caprice be a reason," retorts he, saying it in quite a low tone.

"I do not understand you," says Miss Neville, with some haughtiness of look and manner; "nor do I desire to do so."

"'Tis folly to remember,'" quotes he from a song she herself is in the habit of singing, and with a short, unmirthful laugh. "You are right. To encourage forgetfulness should be one of our greatest aims. But to return to our first discussion. I am indeed the unhappiest of men. Is there no hope that you will change your mind, and let me live in the expectation of being favoured with one waltz?"

"I can offer you no such hope," returns she, with so much pointed decision in her voice and expression, that Saumarez, turning sharply on his heel, takes off his hat with a frowning brow and a somewhat vindictive glance, and next minute has disappeared amongst the crowd.

There is a slight but perceptible pause after he has gone. The other men have melted away before this, and only Penruddock remains.

"I hardly think I shall stay on for your dance," he says, presently, with some hesitation, looking disappointed, and speaking in a very dejected tone.

That little bit of information just given by Miss Neville to the effect that all her dances were disposed of has checked his ardour for the Audley Street "small and early," and has, in fact, reduced him to a state that borders on despair.

About a week ago, Miss Neville had almost promised him a waltz at this particular dance, but doubtless she has by this time forgotten all about such a promise, and has given the waltz in question to some more favoured individual.

"My dear child, why not?" asks Mrs. Neville, kindly, struck by the sudden melancholy of his appearance. "I do hope, my dear Dick, you are not given to moping. So many young men mope now-a-days. I believe they call it by a finer name, but it really comes to the same thing. Now why won't you stay on for my dance to-night?"

"It sounds rude, and it is rude," confesses Mr. Penruddock, with some contrition; "but the fact is, I know I shouldn't enjoy it—I—I couldn't stand it," says Dick, with a reproachful glance at Beauty, who sits apparently careless and unmoved, looking before her.

But at this moment Miss Neville sees fit to join in the conversation.

She turns her head slowly, and letting her handsome eyes meet Penruddock's, chains him to the spot by the very power of their beauty.

"Then I suppose I am at liberty to give away

that third waltz that I promised you at Lady Rye-croft's?" she asks, slowly, without removing her gaze.

"You remember it? I thought perhaps you had forgotten," says Penruddock, eagerly. "No, do not give it away. Dear Mrs. Neville, do not think me unstable, or fickle, or anything that way, but the fact is, nothing on earth should keep me from your dance to-night."

He flushes a dark red, laughs a little, raises his hat, and, as though unable longer to endure the rather mischievous smile in Miss Neville's blue eyes, beats a hasty retreat.

"He is a dear boy—quite charming," says Mrs. Neville, who is feeling puzzled, "but certainly a little vague. So very unlike his father, who was the most unpleasantly matter-of-fact person I ever met. What were you saying to Captain Saumarez, Maudie? I saw that you were talking to him, but you did not seem very genial, either of you."

"He is very distasteful to me," says Maud, quickly. "I don't know what it is, auntie, but I feel a horror—a hatred of that man. His manner towards me is insolent to a degree. It is as though he would compel me, against my will, to be civil to him, and I never shall!" concludes Miss Neville, between her little white, even teeth.

"I don't think I care much about him myself," says Mrs. Neville. "He always seems to me to be



something of an adventurer; and, besides, he is a friend of all the Penruddocks, and, except Dick, I never liked any of them. Not that he is much of a friend there either, as he never speaks of them, and even if drawn into conversation about Dick's father, as a rule says something disparaging. But he has money, and is received everywhere; and I really think, my dear child, he is very devoted to you."

"Oh, do not, pray, try to make him even more detestable in my sight than he is already," says Maud, with a shiver that may mean disgust.

"Oh, no! Of course I meant nothing. And he is the last man that I should care to see you married to. But some time or other you must make a selection—you can but know that—and I am always thinking for you, indeed I am. Dick Penruddock is very much in love with you, I really believe, though you always deny it."

"I deny it because I think he is not. I hope with all my heart and soul that he is not," says Maud, with sudden and unlooked-for energy.

All the colour has fled from her cheeks, and her lips tremble slightly.

"Well, my dear, perhaps so. I own I am stupid," says Mrs. Neville, who, though the best and kindest of women, is certainly in no danger of setting the Thames on fire with her cleverness. "Though I can't see why you should dislike the idea so much.

He is quite charming in my opinion, and *so* handsome! Then there is Lord Stretton; you can't tell me that *he* does not adore the very ground you walk on!"

"Oh, Stretton!" says Miss Neville, disdainfully.

"But, my dearest, you *must* marry someone!" says her "auntie," in an aggrieved tone. "Dick, as I say, is all that one could possibly desire; but Stretton has a title, and that always counts. As that dear man in *Punch* said some time ago, 'Beauty and goodness may fade and pall, but a title *lasts*.' There is certainly a very great deal of sense in that remark, and it *is* nice to have a duke for a brother-in-law."

"I don't think Wolfhampton would be nice as a brother-in-law were he fifty times a duke," says Maud, with a curl of her short upper lip.

"He might be improved on, certainly; I don't dispute that," Mrs. Neville admits, sadly. "His manners are positively distressing, so redolent of the stable; and his nose is out of all proportion!"

"It is so like Lord Stretton's that no one could possibly know one from the other," says Maud, wilfully.

Mrs. Neville sighs. The case is beyond argument. It is indeed only too true that Lord Stretton's proboscis bears a painful resemblance to his brother's.

"Dick Penruddock is, of course, in many ways

far preferable," she says, presently, shifting ground. "He is quite as rich, and is younger, and has prettier manners. But, then, you say you object to Dick also."

"No, I don't object to Mr. Penruddock," says the girl, with a soft, slow blush; "that is not it. You mistake me, Mimi." (This is the pet name she gave to Mrs. Neville when a child.) "I only mean that I shall never marry."

"But why—*why?*" impatiently.

"Can *you* ask me that?" returns she, with a glance full of the liveliest reproach.

"But the thing is not a secret—all the world knows how I adopted you, and that you are the daughter of some poor mechanic, dead before I ever saw you. But they know, too, that you are the most beautiful and the most charming girl in town! Yes, you *are!*" in answer to a deprecating shake of Miss Neville's head; "and if these men love you, and choose to overlook such a little fault, why, then, I cannot see——"

"A *little* fault!" repeats she, sadly. Then, with a touch of pride, "Nay, it is no fault at all, but it is a great misfortune; and though Stretton—or—or Mr. Penruddock may, perhaps, foolishly wish to marry me, do you honestly believe their families would receive me with open arms? Do you think it at all likely that Dick's father would be glad to

see him married to a girl without name? It is impossible, Mimi!"

"I know not what they might think or say, but I know that if he were my son I would gladly see him married to you," says Mimi, maintaining her cause stoutly.

"That is because you love me, and because you are different from all the rest of the world," says the girl, gently, looking at her through a soft mist, that dims the beauty of her eyes, and is born of tenderness, and gratitude, and deep affection.

At this moment the carriage draws up at their hall door, and, alighting, they pass into the house.

## CHAPTER V.

### AFTER THE DANCE.

It is many hours later, and the dance is at its best and gayest. The sound of music and the delicate perfume of dying flowers are in the air.

The rooms are filled with all that London can afford of its brightest, and highest, and best, and pretty women in toilettes almost as desirable as themselves are smiling and waving their fans, and doing all the damage that soft eyes and softer speech are supposed to do.

It is the third waltz, and the band is playing "Mon Rêve." In Dick Penruddock's opinion it is

the waltz of the evening, as his arm is round Maud Neville, and her perfect head is very near his own.

He is as happy as a man can be who holds all he deems most precious for one moment to his heart, knowing that the next might separate them for ever.

Presently they pause to rest, and find themselves near the door of a conservatory.

"Are you tired?" asks he, seeing she sighs, and raises one hand in a half-wearied fashion to smooth back some loose hairs that have wandered across her forehead. "Come in here, and sit down for a little while."

He tightens his arm on the hand resting upon it, and moves towards the cool retreat before them.

"If you wish it," replies she, uncertainly, and with some slight hesitation in her manner.

Yet she goes with him into the dimly-lighted conservatory, where a little fountain is splashing, sending forth a cold, sweet music of its own, and where green leaves are glistening calmly beneath the beams of the subdued lamps.

The time—the hour—the very drip, drip of the fountain—all bespeak loneliness; and to feel oneself alone with a beloved object, as a rule, kills wisdom.

Penruddock, who all day long has been enduring suspense, and an uncertainty that borders on hope, suddenly loses his head. Laying his hand on

Maud's, he bends down to her, and whispers something in a soft, impassioned voice.

The girl appears neither startled nor surprised, and when she speaks, her tone, though perhaps a shade slower than usual, is firmer than ever.

Only she changes colour, and grows pale until her very lips are bloodless.

"You speak without thought or reflection," she says, gently. "You have considered nothing. No, no; do not interrupt me! I am sorry this has occurred; but there is no reason why we should not forget what you have just said, and be good friends as we were before."

"There *is* a reason, and a strong one," returns he, very quietly now; "and as to our being mere friends, that is quite out of the question. Do you imagine me an impulsive boy to say a thing one moment and regret it the next? I have dared to say to-night what I have wanted to say for many days. And I must have my answer now."

"And my birth—have you forgotten that?" demanded she, looking at him fixedly.

"I have forgotten nothing. But to me it makes no difference. Princess or peasant, how can it matter? I love you. Darling," says the young man, very earnestly, taking both her hands and holding them closely, "I implore you to believe in my love! Take time for reflection, consider well! I entreat you to give me no hurried answer!"

"I do not hurry," returns she, in a strange tone; "I will not even argue with you. Let us say no more about it; and please let my hands go, Mr. Penruddock. I cannot marry you—indeed, I cannot!"

"But why?—at least, tell me that?" demands he, desperately, refusing to release her hands. "Maud, answer me! Do you—is it true that you love another better, and that is why you cannot care for me?"

"No; that is untrue," replies she, with quick pain in voice and eyes. "I love no one better than you; which means, of course,"—hurriedly, and with a sad little quivering laugh—"that I love *no one*. You will understand me?"

"Only too well," returns he, sadly. He lifts her hands, and kisses them separately, in a forlorn, lingering fashion. "And yet there is some talk of Stretton," he says, miserably, his face haggard and unhappy.

"That report is false," she says, slowly.

Then, after a faint hesitation, she raises her head and regards him with earnest attention.

Her eyes are full of unshed tears, and her voice, soft and low as it always is, trembles a little as she speaks.

"Believe nothing you hear," she says, impressively; "only this—that I shall *never* marry."

Turning abruptly from him, she moves towards

the ball-room, and standing in the doorway, gazes, without seeing anything, at the swaying crowd before her.

Presently she becomes conscious that two dark eyes are fixed upon her; she turns restlessly, and Captain Saumarez stands at her side.

"Not dancing, Miss Neville?" begins he, lightly. "And all alone, too!" Then, with a change of manner, and throwing some concern into his tone, he says quietly, "You look overtired. May I take you out of this to one of the smaller rooms beyond, or in here?" pointing to the conservatory she has just quitted.

"Oh, no; not in there!" exclaims she, with some distress. "But I shall be glad to get away for a little while."

Taking his arm, she makes her way slowly through the dancers and the lingerers at the doorway, and presently sinks, with a sigh of relief, into a low chair, in a small room that opens off an ante-chamber.

The music seems so very far away that the noise and confusion could almost be forgotten. Oh, that she could now get rid of her companion, and find herself, if only for one short half-hour, alone!

"Something has annoyed you. Can I help you in any way?" says Saumarez, in his gentlest manner.

"You are very good. No; it is nothing. I am only slightly fatigued," returns she, listlessly.



"May I get you something? A glass of wine—some iced water?"

"Thank you—nothing."

Her evident determination not to be friendly, her extreme coldness of voice and gesture, pique him beyond endurance. What has he done to her that this proud girl should treat him with such open disdain?

"I saw you go into that conservatory about ten minutes ago," he says, after a slight pause, some reckless desire to rouse her from her apathy, and bring anger, if he cannot summon love, into those beautiful eyes below him, inciting him to this speech. "You seemed greatly disturbed when you came out again. Was that boy rude to you?"

He has certainly gained his point. Miss Neville's blue eyes literally flash with anger.

"That boy?" repeats she, in an impassible tone.

"I am speaking of Penruddock," returns he, with cool persistence. "Was he rude?"

"I hardly know how to answer such a question," says Miss Neville, frigidly. "I never knew until now—to-night—that any man could be rude to me?"

"Ah! then I am to understand he did offend?" says Saumarez, insolently, his evil genius at his elbow.

"I was not alluding to Mr. Penruddock—he is incapable of any act of ill-breeding; I was alluding

to you!" says Maud, in a clear tone, rising as she delivers this retort.

She would have swept by him and left the room, but with a smothered exclamation he seizes her hand, and detains her against her will.

"Stay!" cries he, with some passion. "I have something to say to you, that I have too long withheld, and that you shall hear now or never."

"Then it shall be never!" says the girl, quickly. "I decline to listen to anything you may have to say. Release me, sir; your very touch is hateful to me!"

"Ay, since Penruddock came upon the field. Do you think I am so blind that I cannot see how he has gained favour where all others have been treated with studied coldness? Do you think I have not noticed how he——"

"I decline to discuss Mr. Penruddock with you," says Maud, throwing up her head with a gesture full of graceful dignity that might have adorned a queen.

"Is he so precious in your sight?" says Saumarez, with a sneer. "And is this new lover prepared to overlook the fact of your humble birth?"

"Take care, sir; do not go too far!" says Maud, her voice vibrating with indignation.

"I don't care how far I go now," declares he, all the evil blood in his heart surging upwards to the surface. "I love you too! Yes; you *shall* listen

to me, though it be for the last time!" tightening his fingers on her wrist. "I love you, as that boy can *never* love you—with all the strength of a man's deepest devotion!"

"Hush! *your* mention of love is but an insult!" says she, in a withering tone.

"My voice is not so silken as his, no doubt," replies he, driven to madness by her loathing. "Nor do soft words trip so readily from my tongue. But will his love stand the test of time? Will he never regret that he has married one who is——"

He pauses.

"Lowly born."

She supplies the words; speaking them bravely, and not flinching from the stroke.

"Ay, and *basely*!" says he, between his teeth.

It is a lie, and he knows it. But at this moment he would have uttered any false thing to lower the pride of the woman whom—strange paradox—he loves, yet hates!

A terrible change passes over Miss Neville's countenance as the words cross his lips.

"No, no; it is not true!" she cries, all her courage forsaking her. "I will not believe it! What can *you* know more than all the others? Ah! is it for this reason I have dreaded you? Have pity, and unsay your words!"

"I do not speak without authority," replies he, quickly, stung again by her admission that she

dreads him. "I know all about your birth"—there is an air of undoubted truth about these words that strikes cold to her heart,—“and I tell you again, that you are not only humbly but basely born!”

She shudders violently.

A low cry escapes her, and with the hand that still remains free she covers her face.

At this instant, Penruddock, followed by Mr. Wilding (with whom he is earnestly conversing), enters the room. He is unfortunately in time to hear Miss Neville's agonized cry, and to hear Saumarez's last words.

Going up to the latter, he pushes him backwards, releasing Maud from his grasp.

“Who has dared to apply such words as ‘basely born’ to Miss Neville?” he asks, in fiery tones.

“I have said so, and say it again!” says Saumarez, with his usual evil sneer.

“You are a coward!” says Penruddock, losing all command of his temper; and, raising his gloved hand, he strikes him across the face.

There is a second's awful silence; then Saumarez—who has instinctively raised his hand to his cheek, on which a pink line may be traced—says, quietly, turning to Penruddock, “When, and where?”

“The sooner the better,” says Dick, still white, and wild with fury.

Maud, who has shrunk aside, and who is now

standing close to Mr. Wilding, says to him, in a nervous whisper, so low as to be almost unintelligible, "What does it all mean?"

"Fighting, I think," says Mr. Wilding, who is a plain-spoken man at times, and given to electrify the judges in court on certain occasions. "They are arranging a duel, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"But it must be prevented!" says Maud, wildly. "Something must be done!"

Going up to Penruddock, she lays her hand upon his arm,—“Let me speak, Dick!” she says, in trembling accents.

The word—his Christian name—has unconsciously escaped her; but he has heard it, and proudly, gladly, takes the little hand upon his arm between both his own, as though this unexpected mention of his name had made her his—had been an informal confession of her love.

"There is no need that you should quarrel," she goes on, with lowered eyes and pallid lips. "He is right; he has but spoken the truth. I *am* lowly born, as all the world knows; though, sir," confronting Saumarez, and gazing full at him with terrible grief and reproach in her glance, "it has yet to be proved how you came to use that word 'basely.'"

"My conduct to you has been unpardonable, madam," says Saumarez, bowing and drawing back, with set lips and a stern expression. "I ask your forgiveness. To your friend, Mr. Penruddock, I

shall give every satisfaction necessary—the very *strongest* satisfaction!” concludes he, with a grim smile; after which he bows again, and withdraws.

Miss Neville bursts into tears, and sobs bitterly for a few minutes. Penruddock, with his arm round her, supports her head against his breast for some time unrebuked. Presently, however, she checks her emotion, and drawing away from him, wipes the tears from her eyes, sighing heavily.

“You have got your work cut out for you, you know,” suggests Mr. Wilding, in a low tone to Dick, who had forgotten everything but Maud’s grief.

“I am quite aware of that,” mutters Dick.

“If you are going to cross to the other side, you will have but very little time to arrange matters before starting.”

“There is little to arrange,” says Penruddock, absently. “My cousin George falls in for everything if I come to grief in the encounter.”

Then he goes up to Maud, who is still silently crying and takes her hand again.

“Tell me the truth now,” he says. “At this last moment, it would be a solace, a comfort to me. That time—a few minutes since, when you called me ‘Dick’—your tone, your whole manner thrilled me; it almost caused me to believe that I was not quite indifferent to you. Was that presumption, madness, on my part? Speak darling!”

He bends his head, and she whispers something in a voice half broken.

It must have been some word of encouragement, as Penruddock's visage brightens, and his whole manner changes.

"And if I return?" he begins, eagerly.

But she interrupts him.

"Oh you must—you *will* return!" she says, painfully.

"If I do, you will marry me?"

She shakes her head.

Even at this most solemn moment her great resolve is not to be broken.

"My dear Penruddock, this is out of all bearing," says Mr. Wilding, who has been engaged in an engrossing examination of a bit of old Chelsea, but now feels it his duty to come to the rescue and deliver Miss Neville from her embarrassment. "Let us discuss what you have got to do."

"That is simple," says Penruddock, with a frown. "If luck stands to me, I shall shoot him through the heart."

"No, no!" says Maud, faintly, putting up her hand in quick protest. "To kill him, that would be murder! Do not have his death upon your conscience."

"Would you shrink from me because of that?" asks he, wistfully.

"It would be so terrible," she falters.

"Yet, remember, it would be in your cause."

"For that very reason,"—earnestly,—“I should feel it all the more. And later on, when you had grown cool, it would be to yourself an everlasting regret, and I should be the author of it. Oh, let him live!”

"Well, I daresay I shall," says Penruddock, in a curious tone; "for this reason—that I suppose he will kill me."

"He splits hairs, and sixpenny-bits, and all sorts of thin things, at any number of paces that you like to name," says Mr. Wilding, pleasantly.

Miss Neville shudders, and turns a shade paler even than she has been through all.

"After all, there is not so much in life that one should regret it to any intense degree," says Dick, who takes it rather badly that she objects to his killing Saumarez.

"My dear boy, there you err," says Wilding, briskly. "There is a great deal in life, if you go the proper way to find it, and if you don't expect too much; that is the great secret. Life is a first class thing in my opinion—nothing like it. I never, you know, fight duels myself—nothing would induce me; but if you *must*, my dear Penruddock, aim low, and cover him well with your eye. I'll see you through it, and stick to you, my dear boy, whatever happens."



"Thanks, old man; I knew quite well that you would not desert me," says Dick, gratefully.

"Can nothing be done?" says Maud, clasping her hands. "Oh, Mr. Wilding, do try; surely something may be effected if you will only try!"

"Of course I shall try," says Wilding, promptly. "I'll stand to him all through—I have promised that. By Jove! I wouldn't advise that fellow to do anything unfair when I am on the field! And if"—impressively—"anything unfortunate should occur, I'll——"

"Oh, Mr. Wilding, how I hate you!" interrupts Miss Neville, with a sudden burst of wrathful tears. "If no one else will help me," cries she, going hurriedly towards the door, "I shall try, at least, what a weak woman can do!"

She opens the door, closes it behind her firmly, and runs upstairs to her own apartments.

## CHAPTER VI.

### AN ENTREATY.

It is an hour later; and in his library Gilbert Saumarez is sitting with folded arms, on which his face lies hidden.

The table is strewn with papers.

A crumpled, faded flower and a little, six-but-

toned black-kid glove are on the desk close beside him; how procured, he alone knows.

Certainly, they were never given to him by their rightful owner.

The lamps are lowered, until a half-gloom, that is almost darkness, envelopes the apartment.

Ghastly shadows creep here and there, unchecked, unnoticed by the man who sits so silently in the arm-chair beneath the centre lamp.

He is lost in thought, in vain regrets, that belong to the present and the near past, but have no connection with the morrow, that may bring death in its train.

But not to him.

No fear of being "done to death" in open fight need harass him.

He is too expert a shot; has too often earned his reputation as a skilled duellist, to feel nervous at the prospect of an encounter with an amateur—a raw schoolboy in the art of duelling, as he rightly terms Penruddock.

He has killed his man before this; and having made up his mind to shoot this present rival as he would a dog, has dismissed the subject from his thoughts.

Other considerations crowd upon him—other remembrances, sweet and bitter; and so absorbed is he in his inward musings, that he does not hear the door open, nor the sound of the light feet that ad-

vance across the floor, until the owner of them is almost at his side.

He raises his head then, and looking up, starts to his feet with an exclamation that is caused by a surprise which for a moment completely overpowers him.

It is Maud Neville who stands before him, pale as "the snowy lily pressed with heavy rain."

Her eyes are large, half-frightened, and full of grief. Beneath them dark circles show themselves. No faintest tinge of colour adorns her cheeks. Her hair, under her swansdown hood, has loosened, and strays across her low, smooth forehead at its own good will.

She is pale, nervous, thoroughly unhinged, yet never perhaps has she looked so lovely.

To Gilbert Saumarez, gazing at her, some old lines occur that seem to apply to her as to none other—

"To see her is to love her,  
And love but her for ever,  
For nature made her what she is,  
And ne'er made sic anither!"

"You here, and alone!" he stammers, moving from her rather than towards her.

"Yes, here," returns she, in a low tone tremulous with emotion. "Esther waits for me outside. I have so far forgotten my own dignity and self-respect as to come here to you at midnight, compelled by

a sudden necessity. The more reason, sir," with an upward glance of mingled entreaty and pride, "that you should respect both!"

"Speak!" returns he, coldly.

She throws back her hood and cloak as though half-stifled, and stands before him in all the bravery of her satin ball-dress, on which the pearls gleam with a soft, subdued light.

"I have come to ask you to forego this duel—to give it up," she says, faintly, discouraged by his manner, yet not wholly dismayed. "I entreat you to hear me, to listen to what I have to say, not to turn a deaf ear to my prayer."

"Yet to my prayer not an hour since you were deaf," retorts he, quietly.

She is silent.

"You would ask me to spare your lover—that boy, Penruddock," says he, with a mocking smile, "and so proclaim myself a coward, as he called me? Impossible! Why, he struck me across the face with his open hand—here!"

He raises his hand to the cheek that still bears the mark of the blow, but was paled as the remembrance of the deadly insult returns to him.

His eyes blaze with wrath. Involuntarily he clenches his hand.

To the girl watching him there seems indeed but small hope of mercy.

She draws nearer, and by a sudden impulse lays her hand upon his.

"At least, do not kill him!" she says, despair in her tone, an awful look in her great gleaming eyes. "Do not murder him! He is young, and youth is precious. You will have mercy on him, will you not?"

Overcome by fear, and utterly unnerved, she sinks at his feet and gazes up at him, speechless, but still with imploring look and gesture.

There is a childish grief and anxiety in her lovely face that touches the world-worn and almost utterly callous heart of the man before her.

"How you must love him," he says, bitterly, almost scornfully, "to bring yourself to do what you have done to-night! That you—you, proud child—should come here where no woman could be seen without injury to herself, convinces me of—— But, no!" He interrupts himself, and his voice grows suddenly tender. "I will take care that no evil shall be spoken of you; you need not be afraid of that!"

He stoops and raises her gently from the ground.

"You will promise me," she entreats, in a whisper, "to spare him? I know how skilful you are—what an easy matter it would be to you to place a bullet in his heart. But you will spare him? And who can say but this one deed of mercy may save your soul at last?"

"My soul!" says he, with a haunting laugh. "And supposing that at your earnest instigation I do consent to spare your lover—what then, I pray?"

"I have no lover," says the girl, simply. "I never shall have one. You should know that—you, who told me in plain language not an hour since of my lowly birth and breeding."

"Pardon me," says he, lowering his eyes, shame covering his brow with crimson. "If I could recall that last hour I would. I lied when I spoke of disgrace."

"You do not deceive me now—you tell me truth?" asks she, with agitation. "Yet you said that you knew of my birth—that I was base-born."

"This is no time for such discussion," says he, evasively; "but if ever you want a witness to prove your birth, send for me. And now, am I forgiven my offence?"

"I have forgotten everything," says she, eagerly, "only this—that I want your promise. Swear to me Dick Penruddock's death will not lie at your door?"

"And if I give this promise—if I tell you I shall fire over his head instead of straight into the centre of his heart, what shall be my reward?"

"Name it," says she, thoughtlessly.

"It is a simple request. I ask but one kiss, and my oath shall be given."

She starts, and shrinks from him perceptibly.

"You are no man to ask me that!" she says, white to the lips again, and with her small hands tightly clenched.

"Yet that is my bargain—the only one I will make!" returns he, doggedly.

Within her breast fierce battle reigns.

All a woman's innate modesty fights with love's self-sacrifice.

The struggle is severe, but lasts not very long. Love conquers.

"For his sake!" she murmurs, brokenly.

And then she goes up to Saumarez, and stands before him, her face like marble.

"You shall have your reward!" she says, faintly.

He lays both his hands upon her shoulders, and regards her earnestly.

Then he pushes her somewhat roughly from him, and laughs aloud—a very unpleasant laugh, and one by no means good to hear.

"Look here," he says; "*I* can be generous, too! Keep your kisses!—keep" (bitterly) "your lips unsullied for him! And keep my promise, too; I give it freely, without reward, just for love of you! Perhaps in the future you will confess that I loved you at least as well as *he* does, or any man could! Do I not prove it? For *your* sake—to please *you*—I spare the life of the only man whom I envy, and when I could shoot him as easily as I could a dog!"

"You are generous, indeed!" she says, below her breath. "I cannot thank you as——"

"I want no thanks!" he says, shortly. "This is our last meeting—unless," with meaning in his tone, "you *want* me, you shall never be cursed by the sight of me again! This country has grown hateful to me! And your fair face has been my ruin—not that *that* counts now-a-days; a life more or less is of little moment! Nay," with an effort, "I do not blame you! It was not your fault! And now good-bye! You must not stay longer. At least, before parting, you will give me your hand in token of good fellowship?"

"Good-bye!" she says.

"Nay, it is not only that; it is an eternal farewell!" corrects he.

She gives him her hand, and, taking it, he holds it closely for a moment only, letting it go almost immediately.

Then, drawing her hood once more over her head, she moves to the door.

But at the last instant, even as her hand is on the lock, he follows her, and, falling at her feet, catches and presses a fold of her dress passionately to his lips.

It is all over then; and, rising, he turns aside, and covers his face with his hands.

A moment later, he finds himself alone.



CHAPTER VII.  
FATHER AND SON.

NOT even to Mrs. Neville does Maud tell of the terrible anxiety that weighs down her spirits, and reduces her to a state that borders on distraction.

She makes no mention of the quarrel that has occurred between Dick and Captain Saumarez, or of her midnight visit to the house of the latter.

But she is restless and miserable, and Mrs. Neville, watching her, knows that something is amiss.

As all next day goes by, and Wednesday dawns, and still no tidings reach her of Dick's welfare, the suspense and terror she is enduring prove almost more than she can bear.

That she loves Penruddock she no longer seeks to deny even to herself, though in her firm determination never to marry him she is altogether unchanged, has not wavered in the least.

It would undoubtedly have been a comfort to her during all these lonely hours of uncertainty to have had someone near her with whom she could discuss her trouble, and to whom she could breathe out all her fears and longings, but that solace is denied to her.

Mrs. Neville, as she knew, entertained a sincere

affection for Penruddock, and to apprise her of his danger would be to raise feelings of grief and direst apprehensions of evil in her kindly heart, and she would herself need comfort, rather than be able to afford it.

So, by a supreme effort, Maud conquered all selfish desires for sympathy, and waited alone for tidings that might bring her joy or sorrow.

"Has Saumarez really and truly kept the promise so strangely given?"

This is the thought that torments her, sleeping and waking, causing her to grow pale, and place her hand upon her heart, if the door should chance to open suddenly, or any servant make a hurried entrance.

May he not bring with him a telegram or message that shall reduce to an unhappy certainty all the vague fears that now distress her?

She is leaning back in a low chair, in the smaller morning-room, making a poor pretence at reading, whilst Mimi sits writing letters at a davenport near, humming gaily, as her pen runs lightly over the paper, a little, soft melody, heard last night at the Opera Bouffe.

The door opens slowly, and a tall woman, dark and careworn, but with all the remains of great and striking beauty, comes quietly into the room.

"Mr. Penruddock is in the drawing-room," she says, in a trained voice, that expresses emotion of

no kind, though, as the name passes her lips, a faint quiver contracts her beautiful features.

"Mr. Penruddock!" cries Maud, with a little gasp, springing to her feet.

"Then why not show him in here, as usual?" asks Mimi, glancing round the pretty boudoir to see what can be wrong with it, her thoughts running on Dick.

"It isn't young Mr. Penruddock; it is his father," says the woman, with sullen looks fixed upon the carpet. "He wishes to see you, madam?"

"To see me? Dear me, what can George Penruddock have to say to me?" says Mrs. Neville, shrugging her shoulders. "I would rather not see him alone. Indeed, I do not think that I could muster courage for that. Will you come to the drawing-room with me, dearest?"

"Oh, no!" says Maud, turning an agitated countenance upon her friend. "Why should I? He knows nothing of me—at least," with a sudden pang of doubt, "I hope not! *If* he should mention me, Mimi, say I have a headache. It will be the truth; my brain seems on fire!"

"What an excitable child you are!" says Mrs. Neville, soothingly. "There, lie down on this couch, and keep yourself quiet, for I promise that you shall not be disturbed. Esther, throw one of those soft Eastern shawls over Miss Neville, and fan her for a little while."

Esther arranges the shawl carefully as Mrs. Neville leaves the room, and pouring some eau de Cologne upon a handkerchief, applies it to her young mistress's temples.

She is a swarthy woman, with a visage full of suppressed power, and with a suspicion of revengefulness in its cast; but her whole expression softens and grows unspeakably tender as she bends above the girl and ministers to her.

When, many years ago, she had brought the baby to Mrs. Neville's house, by her desire, she had so played her cards that she too had been taken in by the soft-hearted, romantic woman, and kept on as nurse to the destitute child, and had never since quitted her.

"That undertaking, last night but one, was too much for you," says Esther, in a low tone. "You have not been yourself since. I greatly blame myself, and am very sorry that I ever had hand, act, or part in it."

"Do not," says the girl, wearily; "though I fear that hazardous step has availed me nothing. I doubt if he has shown mercy to Dick Penruddock."

"Was it to crave mercy for *him* that you sought Saumarez' rooms that night?" asks the woman quickly, a frown contracting her brow.

"Yes; I asked and obtained his promise that he would spare Dick. But this long silence terrifies me; what if he should break his word?"

"Had I known *that*——" says the woman, between her teeth, and said it in such a strange tone that Maud glanced anxiously at her.

"What do you mean, Esther? How strangely you speak!" she says, a little sternly. "Would you rather that Mr. Penruddock met his death? You are cruel, very wicked. What harm has he done you?"

"I would spare none of the breed," says the woman, slowly, her looks fixed on vacancy.

"You speak as though you knew them. Were you ever connected with them in any way?" asks Maud, curiously, sitting up and bending eagerly forward closely to watch her nurse's troubled countenance.

"Connected—no," says Esther, in a tone of cunningly-acted surprise, awaking as though to a sense of danger—"how should I? My head is full of fancies to-day—you must not mind me. And Mr. Penruddock—I hope he will come home safe, my dearie, for he is a brave young gentleman and a handsome one; but not so handsome as my Lord Stretton; no, nor in any way whatever so worthy of you."

"When did Mr. Penruddock come, nurse?" asks Maud, after a pause.

"Almost as I came in. No doubt he is here to speak about his son."

She chooses her words carefully, and marks well the effect produced by them.

"He has heard, it may be, of his constant visits here, and deems you unworthy of an alliance with *his* house. But he need not fear, need he? You have rejected Mr. Dick—you assured me of that the other night?"

"Yes, it is true. His fears are groundless. I do not desire to marry his son!" says Maud, proudly.

"So best," says Esther. "His blood is bad; at least"—hastily—"so I have heard."

Maud is silent.

After a little while she says, in a rather depressed voice and with averted looks, "What is he like, Esther?"

"Who?—Penruddock? Stern and forbidding, cold and haughty, as of old," returns the woman, absently;—"not bowed and broken with the weight of time and memory, as, if he had a conscience, he should be!"

"Why, how you say that!" says Maud, raising herself on her elbow. "For the second time you make me think you know him."

"Nay, child—how should I?" says nurse, impatiently, yet in a half-frightened manner. "It is from all I have heard I judge, and that was no good. The old, too, should not be high and mighty; they should remember the grave, and how it yawns for them—they should repent them of the many sins that they, in the past, have committed."

"How ghostly," says the girl, with a slight shiver. "Do not talk like that; it almost unnerves me. To hear you, one might imagine that Mr. Penruddock was nothing less than a murderer!"

The woman smiles disagreeably, and covers her face with her hand, perhaps to hide the change that passes over it. Then taking up the bottle of perfume again, she pours out some more, and applies it, but with a trembling hand, to Miss Neville's forehead.

"Nurse," says Maud, presently, in a nervous tone, "I have been thinking of something, and I cannot get it out of my thoughts. Perhaps someone has told Mr. Penruddock of this fatal quarrel with Captain Saumarez, and he has come up to town about it, and has come here to accuse me to auntie as being the cause of it; and"—starting to her feet in her agitation—"if that be so, what shall I say or do?"

"Tut, nonsense," says Esther, calmly—"that cannot be. Ill news should 'fly apace' indeed, to carry itself down so far to the country in such a hurry. And, besides, who knew of it? There, my dear child, try to sleep," she says, softly; "and ring for me if you want me again."

So saying, she goes to the door, opens it, and crossing the passage outside, walks lightly downstairs, and seats herself in a room off the hall, from which, with the door just a little way open, she can

command a view of anyone going to or coming from the drawing-room.

Left to herself, Maud for some time lies quietly upon the couch, thinking sadly of all that has happened during the last two days, and of all that yet may happen.

The blinds are pulled down, and the dusk of evening has descended and is creeping everywhere, making odd shadows in far corners, and rendering even near objects indistinct.

The day has been dark and cloudy, and the rain has fallen—now steadily, anon in fitful gusts.

The evening is as gloomy as the day, and at this moment the raindrops are pattering drearily against the window-panes with a sad, monotonous sound that chills the heart.

The usually pleasant room looks dull and cheerless now in the uncertain light—dull as her thoughts, and cheerless as are her hopes!

The moments fly; the ormolu clock upon the mantelpiece chimes the half-hour.

And then there is a noise of footsteps outside, a word or two quickly spoken, and the door is thrown open to admit Mrs. Neville and a tall, gaunt man, who follows her closely and quickly into the room.

Maud, springing to her feet, gazes breathlessly at George Penruddock, though she can barely judge of his appearance in the growing twilight.



She herself, standing back in the extreme shadow, is in such a position that he can scarcely, perhaps not at all, discern her features.

"What have I heard, Maud?" says Mrs. Neville, in great distress. "Is it true that Dick has been led into a quarrel—has, in fact, risked his life in a duel for your sake? Tell Mr. Penruddock yourself that this story is a vile fabrication—a shameless, wicked untruth!"

"I cannot!" begins Maud, huskily.

"You hear her!" says the tall, gaunt old man, in accents that vibrate with anger. "She acknowledges everything. She alone is to blame! This adventuress, this young viper, madam, whom you have taken to your bosom, has wilfully led my unhappy son into a quarrel that has in all probability brought him to the grave!"

"Silence, Mr. Penruddock!" says Mrs. Neville, with an air of offended dignity foreign to her. "This girl that you so ignorantly accuse is in reality as good and true a child as ever breathed, and I shall listen to nothing against her! She herself shall tell us all the truth; but I forbid you to annoy or frighten her with your coarse speeches!"

"Yes; let her speak quickly—let me hear," says Penruddock, brutally, and scowling at Maud.

In a broken undertone, Maud tells them of all that took place between Dick and Captain Saumarez the night of Mrs. Neville's dance, suppressing only

her visit to the latter's house and the promise there extracted.

When she has finished her recital, she bursts into tears, and sobs distressingly.

Mrs. Neville, going up to her, takes her in her arms, and presses her head down upon her kindly bosom.

For a few minutes no sound can be heard in the room save the girl's bitter weeping, as she fondly and gratefully clings to her faithful Mimi.

"Ay, weep!" says Penruddock, cruelly. "You may well waste an idle tear upon the man you have killed—upon the hearth you have left desolate! It was a cursed hour when first he met you! I have heard of you and have been told of your studied coquetries, though I have never seen you, nor do I desire to look upon your fatal face! I thank the friendly darkness now that prevents my seeing one who has blighted my remaining years! I know all! I have heard of the unfortunate infatuation entertained for you by my unhappy son, and I now live to see its sad results! Rest satisfied. Your vanity must surely be satisfied when you know that he died for your sake!"

"Oh, Mimi, do not let him say that! He is *not* dead! He will come back!" says Maud, in an agony of grief and despair, appealing in a heart-broken manner to her friend and mother. "And it

was not all my fault! And—and I will not believe that he is dead! It would be too cruel!”

“What a gloomy room, and what a gloomy topic! Who is talking of death?” asks a gay, glad young voice from the doorway, that thrills the listeners to their heart’s core.

It is a voice that makes the old man start and tremble violently, and hold out his arms in expectation, with a suppressed but thankful cry.

Yet for the first time his loving greeting is overlooked, is cast aside.

A slight figure, half hidden by the dusk, but discernible to the eyes of a lover, has chained the newcomer’s attention, and, oblivious of his father and of all things, Dick Penruddock goes eagerly up to it.

At the sound of his voice, Maud has raised herself, and breaking now from Mrs. Neville, goes quickly to him, and, with an impulsive gesture, lays her hands upon his shoulders.

“It is indeed you! You have really come back to me!” she gasps, in a little, tremulous whisper, that plainly tells her love and gratitude.

“Yes; to *you*!” responds he, gladly. “But there was no danger—none. He fired right over my head, and refused to fire again. No one knows why. I really think he must have had a sneaking kindness for me all through, or else he has tired of killing. So you see I was bound to come back, like that in-

evitable bad coin, you know. Why, what is this? Are those tears, my love—and are they shed for *me*?”

She is looking up at him with eyes full of tears, and pink lids, and pallid cheeks; yet never has she appeared to him so beautiful as now, when decked with these signs of woe that are worn for love of him.

“My dear Dick, what a fright you have given us!” says Mrs. Neville, with a deep sigh, half of relief, half of annoyance. “Why, we have been mourning you as past all help in this world, during the last hour; and now here you are, safe and sound! I really think you ought to be ashamed of yourself, and ought also to offer us a profuse apology.”

“For being alive,” smiled Dick.

“Yes—no, I mean, no—— Dear me, I hardly know what I am saying; but you really ought to feel sorry for all the trouble that you have caused.”

“Have you nothing to say to your father?” says Penruddock, at the far end of the room. “That young lady,”—pointing to Maud—“if all I hear be true, you saw only two nights ago; *me* you have not seen for two months! Yet it seems that you have nothing to say to *me*, though much to *her*. Has”—and this was spoken very bitterly—“has an acquaintanceship of weeks obliterated the affection of years?”

“My dear father!” says Dick, deprecatingly.

Then he kisses Miss Neville’s hand, and leaving her, goes up to where his father is standing.

Maud, glad of the chance, slips from the room at this moment, and escapes to her own sanctum.

"Why, father, what lucky chance has driven you up to town?" says Dick, affectionately, and placing his hand on Penruddock's shoulder.

"No lucky chance, but the news of this duel that you have been fighting," says his father, gloomily. "Into what dangers have you been enticed?"

"Why, how came you to hear of it in your quiet country home?" says Dick, with some amazement.

"It matters little. I did hear, that is plain, and came up by the first train."

"Must have been that incorrigible Wilding," mutters Dick, below his breath.

"My time in this great city must be short," says Penruddock, not heeding him, "and I would speak with you seriously before leaving. When can I find myself alone with you? There is much that I have to tell."

"Any time; I am quite at your disposal. In an hour—half an hour," says Dick, readily. "First, I must see Wilding to explain matters; I had promised to dine with him to-night, but shall, of course, resign everything to devote myself to you. Where shall I meet you in half an hour? Where are you putting up—at the Langham, or Claridge's?"

"Claridge's. I shall expect you at the time you say. Do not disappoint me."

"You have my word," says Dick. "Well, I shall

be off now. Good bye, Mrs. Neville. You must not scold me any more, you know; I'm not proof against your displeasure, that is a positive fact. I shall drop in to-morrow, if I may, to tell you all about my adventure."

"Yes; do come, if only to see how thoroughly I can forgive," says Mrs. Neville, smiling; her heart is incapable of harbouring anger.

And the young man, smiling in turn presses her hand, takes up his hat, and quits the room.

Penruddock, having made his adieux in more elaborate form, goes slowly down the stairs, and into the hall.

As he passes a room, the door of which is now open, a woman, tall and dark-browed, comes quickly forward, as though summoned by his footstep, and confronts him.

As his eyes light upon her, a ghastly change comes over him. He is white as a sheet, seems to shrink and grow smaller, and draws his breath heavily.

"Well, Penruddock," she says, in accents slow and distinct, appearing to enjoy his discomfiture; "and so we meet again! How pleased you look!"

"What has brought you here?" demands he, hoarsely, looking nervously around.

"Fate!" replies she, coldly.

"But here—what has brought you here?" asks he, as though unable to refrain from idle questioning.

The woman, bending towards him, lays her bony hand upon his wrist.

"To help you to remember!" whispers she, in a tone that makes him shudder, so much compressed hatred lies within it. "Have you forgotten? Fifteen years ago this month, Penruddock! Fifteen years ago!"

So saying, she turns abruptly, and enters the room again.

Penruddock follows her.

"Stay, woman!" he exclaims.

"Be not so eager," replies Esther; "we shall meet again."

By this time she has reached a door opposite to that by which she had entered that room, opens, and darts through it, closing it quickly behind her.

Penruddock would still follow her, but reaching the door through which the woman has gone, he finds it locked against him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A TRUE LOVER.

AFTER a momentary sensation of faintness, that follows close on Esther's disappearance, Penruddock rallies, and tells himself that her presence in this particular house is but one of the coincidences that will occasionally occur in all our lives, and that

her wild allusion to objectionable dates has only arisen from the morbid qualities that go so far to make up her character.

By the time his son has arrived, and is ushered into his private sitting-room, he is himself again, composed, calm, and cold, and freer from foolish sentiment than he was an hour ago, reaction having set in.

He opens his subject, which has to do entirely with Dick's misplaced affection for Miss Neville, "so called," without any appearance of excitement or undue warmth, merely expressing in every possible way his disapprobation of the young lady to whom his son is so devoted.

When he has finished, Dick for several moments remains quite silent.

When rejected by Maud on the night of the dance, he had given way to despair, but so many little things have occurred since then to encourage new hopes, that he has, on reflection, declined to be altogether disheartened.

Her love is not as yet given to another, and therefore she may be his some time in the happy undefined future.

"I regret that I must go against you in this matter," he says at length, quietly but decidedly.

He is standing on the hearthrug, his arms folded, and looking frowningly upon the carpet.



His father, standing opposite to him, with clouded brow, is regarding him anxiously.

"You speak like a child who is asked to relinquish a favoured but dangerous toy," he says, contemptuously. "You, with your fortune and position to marry a girl penniless, nameless—nay, if report speaks correctly, even worse than——"

"That will do," says the young man, with a sudden gesture suggestive of passion. "Say nothing more, if you please. It is of no consequence whatever to me that she is poor and nameless, as were she possessed of all the wealth in Christendom, and owner of the highest title in the land, I could not possibly love her more than I do now."

"Sentiment in the young is admirable," says Penruddock, in a sneering tone. "It betrays amiability and good feeling. But even virtues may be carried to excess. Do you—pardon me—but do you mean to *marry* this young woman?"

It would be difficult to say why, but who ever knew a man that wasn't annoyed when anyone called the girl he loved a "young woman?"

"What else should I mean," he asks, with wretchedly-concealed ire, "if she will have me?"

"Oh! you need not entertain any anxiety on that point. They always have one," says Penruddock, contemptuously. "It is generally a complete 'take' in from start to finish." Then, changing his tone from one of unpleasant banter to that of author-

ity. "Now look here," he says; "let us have no more of this. You can't marry her."

Perhaps as he speaks he forgets how the son inherits his own blood and temper to some degree.

"I shall be quite charmed if nothing more is said about it," says Dick, brushing, carelessly, some spots of dust from his coat; "but I shall certainly marry Miss Neville if I can induce her to accept me."

There is something in the quiet determination of his tone that impresses George Penruddock.

Going over to his son, he lays his hand upon his shoulder, and says more gently—nay, even with entreaty—"Think well of what you are going to do. This marriage will mean to you ruin, misery, unavailing regret."

"It means my one chance of happiness," says Dick, with a deep sigh, throwing up his head, and looking eagerly forward, as though in the distance he could see some sight that to him was full of sweetness and light.

"Can nothing move you?" asks Penruddock, unsteadily. "Not all the years gone by, in which I have lived, and thought, and speculated for you alone? Is this, after all that I have done, to be my sole return?"

"Dear father," says Dick, turning to him with quick and eager affection, "why try to make me miserable? I remember all—every kind word and

kinder action; and I would implore you in this, the most important act of my life, to give me your sympathy. When you know Maud you will better understand me, because you too will love her. Tomorrow I shall ask her again to be my wife, and if she consents, which" (and here he looked and spoke very mournfully) "I strongly doubt, you will gain a daughter as loving as your son."

"Nay," says Penruddock, angrily, turning aside; "I want no daughter picked from the mire. Go, sir!" pointing to the door. "I shall not again sue to you for either your love or obedience. Yet stay, and hear my last words, as you intend to go tomorrow to ask that girl again to marry you. I warn you I shall be there too, to explain to her the terrible injustice she will do you should she consent to your proposal."

"And I warn you," says Dick, calmly, but in a very curious tone, "that it will be extremely unwise of you, or anyone, to say anything likely to wound or offend Miss Neville, even in the very slightest degree."

As the door closes upon his son, George Penruddock sinks heavily into the nearest chair, covers his face with his hands, and is overcome with emotion.

"And for this I have suffered, and endured, and sinned!" he says, with a convulsive shudder. "Oh

that it were possible to undo my wretched past!  
But that can never be, alas!—that can never be!”

\* \* \* \* \*

When Dick leaves his father's presence, it is but to hasten to his rooms, and send a hasty but tender note to Miss Neville, telling her of his intention to call next day, and again entreat her to look favourably upon his suit.

Then he puts in a few lines about his father, very delicately written, saying that he also intends putting in an appearance at South Audley Street on the morrow; and while assuring her of his own lasting affection for her, implores her—as she feels even a poor sentiment of friendship for him—to pay no heed to any disparaging remarks that ignorance of her sweet excellence may induce anyone to make.

After this follow a few more little sentences, put in rather incoherently, but, in all probability, the dearer because of their want of precision to the reader of them, and then he is hers “most faithfully, and with the entire love of his heart, Dick Penruddock.”

It is a thorough love-letter; one that might have been written a century ago, when love was a thing more sacred and more full of courtesy than it is to-day.

Maud, sitting in her own room, weeps bitter tears over it, and kisses it foolishly but very fondly, and tells herself again and again that fate has dealt

unjustly with her in that it compels her to resign the writer of this gentle *billet-doux*, and putting him entirely out of her life, leave him free to be gained and loved by some more fortunate woman.

And that she must so leave him is, perhaps, the deepest sting of all.

Esther, the nurse, coming in, finds her prone upon a sofa, crying quietly, yet very bitterly, and, full of sympathy, and a little frightened, comes over to her, and smooths back tenderly the soft hair from her forehead.

To this fond and faithful woman, the girl will always be her child, her nursling.

"What is it, my lamb?" she says, bending down to her with deep concern. "What distresses you. All day long you have been fretting, and now, even as evening falls upon us, I find you weeping again! Why is this, my precious? What has happened?"

"It is nothing," says Maud, evasively. "A foolish fancy; and, besides, my head aches."

"Or your heart, perchance. Yet why? He has come back to you, that young Penruddock, safe and sound. Your conscience, therefore, must be free of offence. Saumarez has been true to his word, and has spared him; yet, in spite of all this, you are openly unhappy. The boy is alive. It is I should weep for that, not you."

"Esther," says the girl, suddenly, sitting up, and confronting her with flushed cheeks and angry

eyes, "you must not speak thus—you shall not; and if you persist in hating him, I shall learn to hate you!"

"Ay, that will be my reward, no doubt!" mutters Esther, bitterly.

Her tone smites her listener to the heart.

"I was wrong," she says, with contrition. "How could I speak to you like that?" She slips a warm, soft arm round the woman's neck as she speaks, and Esther, turning, kisses her little hand with passionate love. "How could I hate one who has taken care of me all my life, and even saved me from death once, as you have told me? But of what kind you have not said. Death from starvation, was it?"

"No; from sudden death."

"Why have you never told me about that?"

"What?"

"You know what I mean—that rescue?"

"I shall some day."

"Why not now?"

"I shall wait till you are more sensible."

"I do not understand you."

"I mean, till you have learned to forget Penruddock, and to love another."

"Then I think I shall never hear that story," says the girl, very simply.

"Tut! Does love, think you, last for ever? Time will teach you more than that."

"It would take a very long time indeed to teach me to forget Dick."

"So you think now; but when a year has gone by, and he has forgotten you, and found a fresh idol, then you will come to believe in my words, and then you shall hear the story of your deliverance from death."

"I don't want to hear it," says Maud, wilfully, drawing back from Esther.

She was silent for a few moments, and then asked, in an anxious tone, "Are men really so fickle as you say, nurse?"

"Fickle, and worse! Cold and cruel!"

"But not Dick, I am very sure!" says Maud, with tears in her eyes and voice.

"He is his father's son, and will no doubt follow in his father's footsteps, notwithstanding that his mother was, really and truly, a saint upon earth."

"Was she?" eagerly. "Then I think he must be like his mother."

After which she falls to weeping again bitterly, with the little crumpled note, so precious to her, hidden in her small, feverish hand.

Her tears seem to drop like molten lead upon the woman's heart.

She gets up impatiently, and paces the room in a restless fashion, stopping at last close to the chair where her darling sits lamenting.

"Do not cry," she says, tapping the back of the

chair with nervous fingers. "Why will you spoil your eyes and wear away your heart strings? What is it that ails you now? Tell your old Esther?"

"It is a hopeless wish," says the girl, mournfully; "but I want to be as other girls are—I want to have a father and a mother of whom I need not be ashamed. I want to be born in the same society as—as Dick's, and to be his equal. I don't want money; I only want to be raised above the finger of scorn. Oh, Esther, come near to me! I must tell it all to you! I never knew until to-day, when he seemed given back to me from the grave, how fondly, how truly I love him!"

"Alas—alas! that things should have gone so far!" mutters Esther, regretfully.

"When I saw him again, and felt his hands in mine, a great well of joy sprang up within my heart. It was as though he belonged to me, was mine for ever—as if nothing could ever part us again; yet it is all in vain."

"All is vanity," repeats the woman, dreamily.

Her thoughts seem far away, lost in dreams that belong to a curious past.

"To-morrow," goes on Maud, sadly, smoothing out the crushed note with tender fingers, "he is coming again to ask me to be his wife, and for the last time I shall say no. After that we shall be strangers for ever, and how shall I bear it? Oh, how bear it, and live?"



"Then marry him, if your heart is so set upon it," says Esther, sullenly.

"Do you think I would do him such an injustice? And, besides, I would not marry him against his father's will. I have still"—scornfully—"some pride left."

"How can you possibly know that Penruddock would seriously object?"

"By this letter, though the thought is well disguised, and by many other things."

"So, still proud!" says the woman scornfully. "Yet the day is fast approaching when he will be compelled to lower his tone!"

"What do you say, Esther?" hastily cried Maud, wondering at those words.

"Nothing. Never mind me. Yet it kills me to see you unhappy, when I could help you."

"Help me! Oh, nurse, if you only could!" says the girl, in deep agitation, kneeling down before Esther, and leaning her arms on her knees while gazing with intense earnestness into the dark visage above her. "Sometimes your manner is so strange it makes me believe you are suppressing something. Dear nurse—dearest Esther, help me in this matter if you can! Mr. Penruddock is coming here to-morrow with Dick. Help me to meet them. Oh, do, pray do! You could not endure to see me miserable, I know, help me, then, dear Esther; if only for the sake of your own peace, help me!"

There is a whole world of entreaty in the large blue eyes, that gaze upwards through a veil of tears.

Esther, after a moment's hesitation, and fearful struggle with herself, makes a gesture as though resigning something that for years had been sweet to her, and, stooping, presses her lips fondly to Maud's white brow. Is she not as her own child—dearer to her than anything the world can offer? Shall she not, for her darling, relinquish her pet scheme?

"Perhaps the time is come," she says, slowly. "Tell me, child, is Gilbert Saumarez in town?"

"I don't know; but you could find out. Why do you want that dreadful man, nurse?"—with a blush and a shudder, as she remembers that last meeting with him, in which Esther had borne a part.

"Now lie down again, and try to sleep, or you will be in a high state of fever to-morrow, and unfit to encounter anyone," says Esther, with authority, not answering her question. "And"—meaningly—"there is *much* before you—more than you form any idea of!"

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## CHAPTER IX.

## ALL KNOWN.

NEXT morning, sitting in her own room, discussing the post and her chocolate, Mrs. Neville grows suddenly serious over a letter just opened, and which not only disturbs, but very greatly perplexes her.

It is from Mr. Penruddock, demanding an interview, and begging her to name an hour in which he may speak to her upon a subject of much importance, both to him and her.

There is no mention of Maud in the letter; yet it so unmistakeably means business in every line, that Mimi feels uneasy, and, ringing the bell, summons Esther to her aid—the woman having proved herself of sound judgment upon several occasions when Mrs. Neville had found herself in want of good advice, and knew not where else to look for it.

For two long hours she and Esther remain closeted together, at the end of which time Mrs. Neville, opening the door, comes out into the corridor with an air of open triumph and gladness in her whole demeanour, that contrasts rather oddly with the pink lids and heavy eyes that betray the fact of her having been crying bitterly. In her hand

she bears a letter, which is addressed to George Penruddock.

Esther, going on to Maud's room, after some persuasion induces her to send a note to Dick, desiring him to come to South Audley Street at a particular hour—that is to say, at nine o'clock that evening.

\* \* \* \*

The lamps are carefully lowered, the curtains drawn. There is sufficient light to discern objects, but hardly enough to read the features of Maud Neville, who, reclining in a low chair at the upper end of the room, sits idly gazing into vacancy, whilst swinging slowly to and fro a huge black fan.

Upon a table underneath Mrs. Penruddock's picture, two lamps are burning dimly.

Mrs. Neville is lounging in a solemn arm-chair, and is to all appearance enjoying life in its greatest intensity, which, to speak more plainly, means that she is slowly but surely falling into the arms of Morpheus.

The sound of a bell rings through the house; there is a pause, and then the door opens slowly, and Mr. Penruddock comes in with the heavy, determined step of one who has a righteous cause to be adjusted, and with his countenance stern and white.

It is at all times a forbidding countenance, no one has ever thought otherwise, though strangely handsome, but to-night it is very nearly repulsive.

He advances to where Mrs. Neville (who was suddenly roused from slumber to a full sense of the situation) is sitting, but pauses on his way, and shudders perceptibly, as, looking up by chance, he sees that he is before the portrait of his dead sister-in-law.

Mrs. Penruddock's large pathetic blue eyes are gazing down upon him, as so often they gazed in life, sweet and earnest, and just now, as it seems to his distorted fancy, something more than all this.

Is it that he has grown superstitious within the last few moments, or do they wear a reproachful look, that thrills his whole being?

Is the beautiful face eager and expectant, as though she would demand at his hands the little one left to him in trust?

Recovering himself by a great effort, he goes up to Mrs. Neville, and says something formal to her about his gratitude for the interview thus granted.

He is perhaps going on to explain why the meeting was solicited, when the abrupt entrance of his son checks him for the time being.

A quick shade of anger crosses the young man's brow as he sees his father.

Instinctively his glance turns to where Maud is sitting, so far apart from the rest; but she is so enveloped by the shadows falling from the lowered lamps, that he cannot distinguish her features with any clearness.

He would have gone over to her at once, but Mrs. Neville, by a sharp gesture of command, stays him, and brings him to her own side.

"Stay, Dick," she says, quietly. "Your place is here—as *yet!*"

So he stays by her, as in duty bound, though sorely troubled at heart.

"After all that I have urged, you have come," he says, coldly, turning to his father.

"Yes; to say that which I told you yesterday I intended to say!" retorts Penruddock, stubbornly. Then, addressing Mrs. Neville, he adds, in a laboured tone, "It would make matters much easier if I might speak to you alone, without the presence of—Miss Neville!"

There is a covert insolence in the hesitation that he shows before pronouncing Maud's name that makes Mrs. Neville angry and indignant.

"If what you have come here to say refers to Miss Neville, it is both her wish and mine that she should be a listener to it," she says, slowly. "Therefore, do not hesitate, but commence at once, and let us hear, if you please, that which you have come hither to speak."

"That is as *you* desire, of course," Penruddock returns, calmly; "and, indeed, it is but little of your time I shall require. I would merely remark that I shall never, under any circumstances, give my con-

sent to an alliance between my son and your adopted daughter."

At this, Maud, who until now has sat silent and almost motionless, starts into life.

She rises to her feet, and though still keeping well in the shadow, turns to confront Penruddock.

"Reserve your disapprobation, sir," she says, in a voice low but distinct; "there is no occasion for it, still less for your consent to my marriage with your son. As he will himself inform you, I have already told him, and very distinctly, that such a union is utterly impossible."

Dick makes a movement as though he would go to her, but Penruddock detains him.

"You hear what she says?" he exclaims, eagerly. "She has refused you. Let it rest there. It is all at an end. Surely you would not press the matter? Have you no self-esteem? Have you no pride?"

"In this case, none," says the young man, sadly. "It is my happiness, my life for which I plead."

"But she tells me plainly that with her own lips she has rejected you."

"If," says Dick, earnestly, going up to Maud, and taking both her hands in his—"if she will also tell you, not only with her lips, but honestly and from her heart, that she does not love me, I shall then resign all hope of ever gaining her. I shall cease to weary her with my presence and my sincere protestations of affection, and leave her free to wed

a happier man; but never until she has told me that. You may therefore spare yourself all further trouble on my account."

He pauses, as if overcome by emotion, and then goes on again, in a voice that trembles slightly, "I await my sentence. Maud, speak!"

But she does not speak. Twice her lips move as though she would unwillingly have given voice to some thought, but no articulate sound escapes her.

Presently she lifts her sad eyes to his as if in mute reproach, and then two tears gather within them slowly, and as slowly fall one by one down her pale cheeks.

"Dick, come here," says Mrs. Neville, nervously, her voice trembling.

He obeys her.

Pressing Maud's cold hands, he whispers hurriedly, "I shall wait for ever."

And then goes back to Mimi's side.

"If you mean to defy me in this matter," says Penruddock, who has overheard him, "you can take the consequences on your own head, and you know very well what those consequences will be. Henceforth you and I shall be strangers, and I will do my best to forget that I ever had a son. But I warn you that such mad marriages bring only grief and disgrace in their train."

"There shall be neither grief nor disgrace through *me*," says Maud, faintly.



She is still standing, and has her hand on the back of her chair as though to support herself.

"It is the first time," goes on Penruddock, remorselessly, not heeding the heart-broken interruption, "that a blot or stain has fallen on our house or name!"

"Silence, sir," cries Dick, furiously turning upon him; but no more can be said on either side, for at that instant the attention of all is turned upon the door, just inside which, upon the threshold, Esther stands, with one arm extended, as if she would demand silence.

There is something in her whole attitude and demeanour that is remarkably striking, and which engenders fear and expectation in every breast.

The looks of all are fixed on her as she comes slowly up the room, her tall majestic figure clothed in black, and drawn up to its full height.

Her manner is expressive of mystery and long-suppressed excitement. Of all present in the room, Mrs. Neville alone possesses a clue to her thoughts.

Silently and slowly she advances until she has reached Penruddock.

Here she comes to a standstill, and confronts him with gleaming eyes and parted lips.

"No blot, no stain upon your house or name? You dare say that! Have you lost all memory of the past? Does your conscience never speak?" she repeats, mockingly. "Is murder no crime? Have a

care, Penruddock! And answer me, if you dare, this question—*Where is the child Hilda?*”

Penruddock starts back, his face growing livid. Yet only for an instant does he lose his self-control; rallying by a mighty effort, he says, glaring savagely at Esther, “This woman, this fanatic, lives but to torment me! Leave the room, I command you! Your idle ravings have nothing whatever to do with the subject we are now discussing. Begone at once, or I will force you hence!”

Esther pays not the slightest heed to that, but pointing towards the picture, and gazing sternly on Penruddock, says, “See where her mother looks down upon you! Do not her eyes haunt you? Where is the little one, the little heiress of Penruddock, who stood so fatally in your way to her house and acres? Answer!—where is she?”

“She is dead—drowned, as all the world knows!” says Penruddock, gloomily, answering her against his will, as if in somewise compelled to it.

“It is false!” cries Esther, triumphantly. “She is not dead! She lives! She is here to claim her own! Behold her, villain, and tremble!”

At this moment Mrs. Neville turns up to their fullest height the two lamps that stand beneath Mrs. Penruddock’s picture; and Esther, holding out her hand to Maud, says, in a loud tone, “Hilda Penruddock come forward!”

Obedying the gesture, not the words, which as

yet she fails to understand, Maud comes slowly forward until she appears in the full glare of the lamps, and right beneath her mother's portrait.

Standing thus, silent and half-bewildered, she is so exactly like the beautiful painting above her, as to call forth an exclamation from Dick.

Mrs. Penruddock is dressed in cream-coloured satin; the girl is attired in cashmere of the same shade, trimmed exquisitely with old gold and some costly lace.

It would be a difficult, indeed, an impossible matter to decide which is the loveliest, the dead mother or the living daughter.

As the extraordinary likeness dawns upon Penruddock, he is completely overpowered, turns aside his head, and groans aloud.

Above even the startling resemblance to the mother, he sees in the grown girl the features of the little child so cruelly, though passively, done to death.

Again the whole terrible scene in the cottage garden flashes before him; again he watches, with cold persistency, until the tiny heiress meets, as he supposes then, and has till now believed, with her death.

He throws up his hands, as though to fling from him the hateful vision, and turns fiercely upon Esther.

"It is all a lie!" he exclaims, loudly,—“a

cleverly-concocted scheme; but it shall not avail you much. It is an old story. Accidental likenesses have been tried before this, but an imposture always comes to light."

"Always! Yes, there you are right," returns Esther, with deep meaning.

Maud, white as an early snowdrop, is clinging to Mrs. Neville, who has her arm round her.

Dick, at a little distance, is listening, with intense excitement, to the strange revelations now being made.

"Who ever saw the child again?" says Penruddock. "She was washed out to sea. All enquiries were made. No stone was left unturned to discover her; but it was too late. There was no one, not a living being, in sight when it occurred; no one saw the fatal accident."

"There you are mistaken. Two saw it," says Esther solemnly. "You and I!"

"I was not present, saw nothing of it!" says Penruddock, hoarsely.

The ground seems slipping from beneath his feet. His parched lips seem barely able to form his words, and he with difficulty supports himself.

"You were present!" says the woman, relentlessly. "You stood inside the library window, and I saw you there, crouched as I was in the bushes at the other side of the river."

"In the bushes?" stammers Penruddock.

“Yes; I had come to get a glimpse of my darling at her play, and watched you as, with greedy eyes, you waited till the child crept nearer and nearer to her death.”

Fearful is now the expression on the countenance of the wretched man.

“Without one word of warning, without one attempt to save the innocent life left to your charge by a dying brother, you looked, with a cruel longing, to see her perish!”

“’Tis false!” Penruddock, with a very great difficulty, contrives to say.

“Though you never touched her, though the crime was a passive one, there was murder in your heart that day, as surely as you are shivering here before us all!”

“It is all a fabrication!” says Penruddock, feebly, wiping his forehead.

Then he glances, in a stealthy fashion, at his son—the boy for whom this horrible thing has been committed—to see if there be condemnation in his looks.

“Dick, do not believe it!” he says, in a tone full of keenest agony.

He looks so old, so broken, that Dick is touched, and going up to him, places his arm round his neck.

“I believe nothing against you, father,” he says, tenderly; “be sure of that. But pray control yourself, and let Esther tell her story.”

"When the deed was done and the fatal plunge taken, you rushed to the water's edge," goes on Esther, who declines to address anyone but Penruddock, gloating over the fact that he plainly cowers beneath her glance. "But even then, at the last moment, a strong desire to save did not possess you. Had you pursued your search to the bend in the river, hidden by the drooping alders, you would have seen the little white figure floating onwards whilst battling feebly with the stream. You would have seen me running along the bank in wild pursuit; and you would have seen, too, the poor child drawn from the water by Gilbert Saumarez."

"Gilbert Saumarez! He?" exclaims Dick, in the utmost surprise.

"Yes; he was a guest at the Vicarage at that time, as you, Penruddock, may remember. But he shall himself tell his own story."

She beckons with her hand, and Saumarez, who has plainly been waiting in the ante-room, on receiving that signal, comes up to them.

"Captain Saumarez, tell us all you can of this strange tale?" entreats Mrs. Neville, with faltering accents.

"I have very little to tell; but it's all quite true," says Saumarez, after a swift glance at Maud's pale face. "I was fishing lower down upon the river on that day, the 14th of July, when, looking up, I suddenly saw a little child struggling in the water, and

a woman—that woman there,” pointing to Esther—“running along the bank. I jumped in, pulled the child out of the river, and saw that it was Hilda Penruddock, whom I knew well. Only that very morning I had been playing with her up at the cottage. I restored her to this woman, who represented herself to me as the child’s nurse, and thought no more about it. I should of course have mentioned it in conversation at the Vicarage if I had had time; but, unfortunately, I had made up my mind to leave that day, and finding on looking at my watch that I should barely catch the up-train, I rushed home, seized my things, bade my friends farewell, and within an hour was steaming up to town. Four days afterwards I started for India, where, as you all know very well, I remained for years.”

“But you knew Maud—you recognized her in town?” asks Mrs. Neville, in great agitation.

A suspicion of shame crosses Saumarez’s face, darkening it for a moment.

“Yes, last year,” he says, unwillingly. “I called here one day, and Esther passed through the hall as I entered. I knew her at once, and asked for the child. She was, I think, about to deny all knowledge of her, when Miss—Miss Penruddock, with whom I was not acquainted at that time, came out of some room, and, looking me full in the face for an instant, passed on. Her wonderful likeness

to her mother, who was well known to me, struck me at once. I had heard of the adoption by Mrs. Neville of some strangely pretty child, and, as if by inspiration, the truth occurred to me. I accused Esther of it, and she at once, taken off her guard, confessed all."

"Then why did you not immediately speak?" demands Dick, coolly.

"It was no business of mine," responds the other, shrugging his shoulders.

"But, surely, you might have spoken," says Dick; "and it seems remarkable that you did not."

"No doubt I should, some time or other, have mentioned the circumstance, only that the woman had implored me to keep silence; saying that she had waited for years to have revenge on someone; and I really thought it a pity to spoil the planning and plotting that had lasted for so long."

"Yet you made love to my niece, knowing all that you did," says Mrs. Neville, gravely.

"In that matter, madam, I acknowledge I erred," says Saumarez, lightly, though he bites his lip. "But all is fair in love and war. I wooed her as a girl over whom a cloud rested, knowing her in my heart to be an heiress, and of irreproachable birth. Nay, hear the exact truth!" he says, with a somewhat reckless laugh. "I am not so rich as the world deems me; and thought if I could win Miss Neville, I might afterwards prove her to be Miss Penruddock,



and so secure her fortune. But I failed. At first I thought only of the money to which she was entitled; but now, and always, I shall think that, were she penniless and unknown, the man who gains her love will be richer than any soul on earth. You believe me, I am sure?" he adds, turning abruptly, and most unexpectedly, to Hilda.

"Yes; I believe you," she says, earnestly; and then—very sweetly, struck by the extreme melancholy of his expression—she comes a few steps nearer to him, and holds out her hand. He takes it, presses his lips to it, hastily but fervently, and without another word quits the room.

"It is, I plainly see, an unnecessary question; but, for all that, I will ask if you have quite made up your mind that this ridiculous story is true?" demands Penruddock, angrily, addressing his son, upon whose countenance no disbelief can be read.

"Quite!" says Dick, readily, who has forgotten to think of any thing beyond the fact that the stigma attached to Hilda's birth has been removed.

"Then you acknowledge her?"

"As my cousin? Yes, certainly."

"Then, as certainly, *you* are a beggar!" says Penruddock, with a harsh laugh.

The young man starts as if shot, and puts his hand to his forehead. For the first time he realizes what all this may mean to *him*. By what right now shall he speak of love to the woman who is all

in all to him, whose image occupies his heart. Their positions are reversed; *she* is the possessor of land and fortune; *he* is now the lonely outcast.

He draws a deep breath, and then rouses himself. Going up to Mrs. Neville, he bids her good night, in a low tone, that still does not falter.

"All this has been too much for you, and—my cousin," he says, gently, though without looking at Hilda. "To-morrow, everything can be discussed more thoroughly; but for to-night enough has been said."

"We shall see you to-morrow, I hope?" says Mrs. Neville, anxiously.

"I think not. It will be better not," says Dick, with a faint smile. "I shall have many things to see to, and my father will, of course, require me."

At this mention of his name, Penruddock turns his head, and all present notice how terribly his face has changed within the last few minutes.

As if all hope has died within him, he looks crushed and broken, and very pitiable.

There is, too, within his eyes a somewhat vacant expression that contrasts very powerfully with his insolent demeanour of an hour ago.

"Eh, Dick?—eh, lad?" he says, in a confused fashion, putting his hand to his head, and sighing deeply. "What are you saying of me? I heard my name——Don't believe them, Dick! It is all

false, every word!" Then, in a tone of eager, almost abject entreaty, he adds, in a whisper, "Don't *you* condemn me, Dick! You have not the right to do that. It was all for your sake, Dick—all for you!"

"Come away! Come home with me, father!" says Dick, hurriedly and anxiously.

A touch of deep pain, mingled with shame, mars the beauty of his features as he listens to his father's words, which are a confession of his guilt.

"Home! Where is that *now?*" asks Penraddock, vaguely, disregarding his son's effort to lead him from the room. "From the Castle to the Cottage—that is a fall, indeed! And," sinking his voice, "I can't go to the Cottage, Dick—*the river is there—always* the river!" with a strong shudder. "And it never ceases—it flows on and on for ever! I can hear it always in my dreams at night!"

"Rouse yourself! You are dreaming now, I think!" says Dick, who is as pale as death.

"No; not now!" says the old man. He looks a very old man now indeed, so strangely altered are his features and mien. "It is too late now for dreams. If what she says be true, all is over, all is at an end!"

"The end is not come yet!" returns Dick, bravely, throwing up his head with a certain proud gesture that brings tears into the eyes of one who is watching him.

He closes one hand firmly, as though to defy misfortune, while into his face there comes a nobility, a sense of dignity, that perhaps it lacked before.

"*You* have 'still enough to satisfy every want," he says, addressing his father; "and as for me, the world is before me, and I shall conquer it in defiance of fate and evil fortune. All is for the best, and we should be thankful that the little one was saved. You *are* thankful, father, are you not? Say that you are thankful," he asks, with extreme earnestness.

It is as though he had completely and entirely dissociated the love of his manhood from the delightful little companion of his earlier days.

"Yes, yes—deeply thankful!" says Penruddock, in a strange tone, hardly recognisable. "A weight is lifted from my heart—a load from my soul—that has lain upon them for many a year! Now it is raised, my heart feels lighter! But," looking helplessly around, "my *head* is bearing the burden now! It feels like molten lead! And there is a sound as of many voices—and——"

A deep groan escaped him; he staggered and, but that Dick hastily caught him in his arms, would have fallen heavily to the ground.

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## CHAPTER X.

## FORCED TO BE HAPPY.

It is two months later, and already Penruddock has lain for six weeks within his quiet grave.

For some days after that fearful seizure—consequent on the destruction of all those hopes he had purchased even at the price of crime—he had lingered in an unconscious state, knowing no one, hearing and seeing nothing, but sometimes murmuring, “The child! drowned—I might have saved her—but, no—let her go—all for my boy—all for my son!”

Then the fertile, scheming brain had come to a standstill; the heart, that in all its many years had known but one pure affection, had ceased to beat, and Penruddock was no more.

Mrs. Neville had called at Dick’s rooms, where the dying man lay, every day during his illness, and had seen Dick and conversed with him many times, of his father’s state alone—no other topic had been touched upon.

On two occasions Hilda had accompanied her, but on those days the young man had been either accidentally or wilfully absent.

Not once during all these long weeks had the cousins met. They had never, indeed, seen each

other since that last momentous evening in South Audley Street, when Esther's disclosure had made them change sides, and had changed the fortunes of both; so happily for the one, so disastrously for the other.

Yet, about that time, there was a policeman in that quarter who for many nights had kept a sharp watch upon a young man, well dressed but with his collar turned up to his ears—looking upon him as a possible burglar, for he would stand for an hour without flinching opposite a certain house, gazing upon nothing—so far as X 91 could see—except a faint streak of light that came from an upper window.

Finally, X 91 grew tired or ashamed of his suspicions, and, comforting himself with the thought that this eccentric young man was either a harmless lunatic or an admirer of the upper housemaid, let him gaze in peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

To-day is too lovely for description. "The sun has drunk the dew that lay upon the morning grass;" the very birds are silent from excess of languor; the flowers droop and grow pensive beneath the heat, and all nature seems at rest.

"The wind had no more strength than this,  
That leisurely it blew,  
To make one leaf the next to kiss  
That closely by it grew."

In the Castle, on this golden September morning, scarcely a sound can be heard. The inner world seems as lazy, as averse to action of any kind, as the world without.

Three days ago Mrs. Neville brought Hilda down to her birthplace; but the girl has refused to find comfort or pleasure in the grand old Castle. Wealth has come to her, and, for the time at least, happiness has departed.

There is a pallor in her cheeks, a fountain of hushed tears in her expressive eyes, that goes to Mimi's heart; but having extracted a promise from Dick that he will not leave England without bidding them farewell, she can only wait patiently, if unhappily, for what is yet to come.

It is coming very quickly, that for which she waits—the solution of all her doubts.

Even as she and Hilda are sitting together in one of the morning rooms, silent, but full of thought, a footstep sounds in the hall without, the door is opened, and Dick Penruddock stands before them, pale and haggard, but always the same Dick in one pair of eyes at least.

"I am very fortunate in having found you at home," says Dick, in his most formal manner. "I have come down here because I promised, and because I could not leave England without bidding you good-bye."

He takes Mrs. Neville's hand, and presses it warmly with a faint, a *very* faint, smile.

"*Good-bye?*" echoes she, in dismay, as though the fear of this hour has not been tormenting her for days.

"Yes; I am about to leave the country, never more to return to it!"

He has not dared to glance at Hilda after the first involuntary look on greeting her.

"But this is all so sudden, so dreadful!" says Mrs. Neville, who is at her wits' end. "What is your purpose in leaving? Where are you going?"

"To New Zealand—anywhere. I hardly know whither; and, indeed, it matters very little, so long as I get well away from the old world and all its associations."

"How you must hate the old world!" says a soft voice close to him, that has a suspicious tremble in it. "Do you mean to carry nothing from it but regrets?"

"Nothing!"—shortly.

"Is everything forgotten?" asks the soft voice again, even more tremulously this time. "Can you remember *no* happy hours?"

"My deepest regret," says the young man, with infinite sadness, "lies in the fact that I shall never be able to forget those happy hours."

Mrs. Neville, kind and considerate soul that she is, has stepped into the conservatory for the time being, therefore they are virtually alone.



"Dick!" says Hilda, looking and speaking very tenderly and very reproachfully.

"Don't!" says Penruddock, hastily. "Do anything but speak to me in that tone. It is more than I can bear. For weeks I have been training myself to meet you with proper coldness, and now, by one kind word, with one gentle look, you would seek to undo all my labour."

"And why, if I may ask, should you want to meet me with coldness?"

She is very close to him by this time, and has laid her hand upon his arm.

"There is no reason why I should tell you, because you know."

"I know!—what is it that I know?"

"Do not torture me."

"I have no desire to do that. But you have not yet said what it is that I know."

"Oh, cruel!" he exclaimed. "You know that you are rich now, whilst I have nothing, or next to it. I—in fact," says Dick, mournfully, "I am no match for you now, whatever I might have been before."

"But you are the same Dick as you were then," argues she, "except that you are a little more—I mean, a great deal more unkind."

"Am I?" says he. "It is very likely. Misfortune embitters us all."

"Won't you look at me, Dick?"

"There is no need to look at you. Your image is engraven on my heart. I can see you at every moment, and shall see you, go where I may."

"Nevertheless, look at me; it may soften you a little. Oh, Dick, I don't want this odious money; but I *do* want you. Now I have said it"—flushing crimson—"and you will not, I hope, think badly of me."

"I could never do that. But it is impossible. Do not let us talk about it."

His voice breaks a little.

"Then you refuse me?"

"Yes; because it is for your own good."

"No; because I happen to have more money than you possess. Let us have the truth, at all events. Say that that is really what you mean."

"Well, then, *yes*, since you make me say it. I could not be indebted to my wife for—for everything."

"No doubt you are right," says Miss Penraddock. "Pride before all things, no matter how many hearts may be broken by it."

She means to be sarcastic, but only succeeds in being wretched.

"Mine is a just and proper pride," he says.

"Oh, very well! Then it is not worth while, I suppose, to say anything more about it?"

"No, indeed," he sighs.

"And you are quite determined to leave England for ever, and to go to New Zealand?"

"Quite."

"Then," cries she, "since you insist upon it, I shall give this hateful money to a lunatic asylum, and, whether you like it or not, I shall go to New Zealand, too."

"Maud!" says Dick, in his overpowering agitation forgetting her real name.

"Yes; I shall. Nothing shall prevent me," says Miss Penruddock.

And here, we very much regret to say, she so far forgets herself as to place her arms around his neck, and to burst into tears upon his breast.

So for the next few moments, at least, Penruddock's trip to the other side of the world is delayed.

He drops his hat, and encircling her fondly with his arms, for a full minute is quite ridiculously happy.

Then he checks himself, and sighing deeply, says, "There must be an end of this. This will never do, you know," in a most miserable tone.

"Never?" says Hilda, who has quite recovered herself, and in whose blue eyes a malicious twinkle may now be seen.

Does not victory already lie with her; no wonder, therefore, that she rejoices?

"Come over to this sofa," she says; "and as we must, to please you, give away our detestable though rather comfortable income, tell me, which

do you consider to be the most deserving of all the asylums?"

At this point, Mrs. Neville coming in, and seeing them sitting together on apparently amicable terms, goes up to Dick, and kissing him on either cheek, tells him, without a word of warning, that he is a "dear boy," and as worthy as anyone can be of her "dearest girl," and that she is happier to-day than she has been for a very long time, and several other things that are equally pleasant to hear.

All which so overpowers Dick, that he has not sufficient courage to say anything that shall damp her satisfaction, and Hilda carries the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

They have been married now for four weeks, and are in Italy, or Egypt, or St. Petersburg, or somewhere—we really have, at the present moment, quite forgotten where.

At all events, we may safely say that, be they where they may, they are two amongst the very happiest mortals the world contains.

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**Z A R A.**



## Z A R A.

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"PESTE! how the sun burns!" she said breathlessly, as she ran lightly up the flowery hill, her bare, brown, shapely feet scarce touching the earth as she went. A lithe girl, softly formed, and lissome as "Dian, chaste and fair," with red-brown hair, and radiant lips, and eyes like deepest midnight. As she ran, one slender hand was tightly clenched. In it lay all her worldly wealth. A tiny wealth indeed—but for it she had worked, and slaved, and *starved*, that it might buy for her the one thing upon the earth she loved. The one thing too that clave to her! She lived alone; no kith or kin laid claim to her.

She gained the top of the hill, and pushing aside the vines and straggling roses that hid a small gateway, ran through it, and up to a man, who, stretched upon a bench, was staring lazily at the white flecked ocean far down below in the curved bay.

"See, it is here, I have brought you the money," she said, panting with eagerness and her swift com-



ing. She held out to him her open hand with the coins lying on the soft palm. "Now give me my Damma," she said, her voice trembling with suppressed delight.

"Too late," said the man slowly.

"But how? The Signor promised me. It is a bargain," flashed she, advancing a step. Hot anger flamed into her eyes, and deadened the sweetness of her lips. "Is it then too little a sum, this? Has your master repented? Eh?" Dismay and scorn fought for mastery in her tone.

"Nay, then, Zara, come and see how it is," said the man, with some compassion. Rising languidly to his feet, he led her to the brow of the hill, and bending over, motioned her to follow his gaze to where the rocks shone white and cold in the dazzling sunlight, a hundred feet below. Upon them, inanimate, and cold as they, lay stretched her only friend, her playfellow.

It was nothing but an old goat after all, so old as to be scarcely worth a thought. But ever since Zara's soul had pierced the haze of infancy, it had romped with her, suckled her, been to her the fondest mother the little waif had ever known, and now it was lying there, crushed, mangled, broken, upon the cruel rocks. She scrambled down to it, by help of heather, and tufts of strong coarse grass, and, reaching the spot, stretched herself beside the dead thing, in speechless grief.

There was blood upon the soft white hair; the face to the heart-broken child looked full of reproach; some pale blue flowers were in its drooping mouth, stained too, with crimson. It was the last fatal mouthful, with death hidden in its treacherous sweetness.

Two or three stars had already crept into the sky when she rose, and went silently back to the cave in the huge rock she called her home. Upon her threshold a man met her.

"Who is the master here?" he asked, impatiently.

"I am, and mistress too," returned she, lifting defiantly to his her large, grief-laden eyes. The one thing she loved was dead; her heart felt dead too; and then—she had so many reasons for hating her own kind.

"St—that is bad," said the man, with a shrug, "for I believe him dying. And *you*—you are a child, you will know nothing."

She passed by him brusquely, and entered the cave. Upon the rude pallet that served her as bed, lay a young lad, fair-skinned, golden-haired, with blue eyes wild and vacant. He tossed his arms above his head, and screamed to her in shrill accents as she drew nearer. The Demon of Fever had him in his grasp, and made a cruel jest of his weakness. He shrieked so loudly, and played such fantastic tricks with his emaciated hands, that for

the moment he drove the dead Damma from the girl's thoughts. She knelt beside him, and pushed the hair from his damp brow. The touch soothed him. His voice sank, and presently faded away into a shaken quavering verse of song that rose feebly, and died and rose again amidst the echoes of the stony roof.

"At his chanting again," said the man contemptuously from the doorway. "He must be better. So!—it is well we were on our way."

He approached the bed, and looked down on the sick boy.

"Come, get up," he said, touching the fever-exhausted body—slim and nevertheless as a willow wand—with his foot—not over roughly, but still with his foot. The boy groaned as if racked with pain, and an agonised expression desolated his face for a moment. It was more than Zara could bear. She sprang to her feet, and held out her hands imploringly.

"Give him to me," she said, a divine pity in her voice. "He is ill—dying perhaps. He will be but a burden to you. Give him to me."

The man hesitated, and glanced at the doorway, through which the sky was peeping. Already night had fallen, and it was essential he should reach the town towards which he had set his face, before day-break. And of late the boy *had* been in very truth a burden; lagging here and there by the wayside,

and too languid to sing before the wine shops the merry lilt and lays that had so often earned them their supper, and a sleep upon the scented hay. Again he glanced at the boy, and marked the deadly pallor of his cheek, the purple ring beneath his lids.

"For the price of a meal you may have him," he said, coarsely, lifting his shoulders and laughing scornfully.

Swiftly she unwound from her waist the strip of coloured linen that encircled her, and drew from it the coins that were to have given her Damma. It was her whole fortune; not a centime would remain in the cave with her, when this was gone. She was freely offering for the purchase of this stricken lad, this stranger with the wandering eyes, blue as gentian, and the yellow locks, wet with fever's poison, all her worldly wealth.

"Take them," she said, holding out the coins to the man, who eyed them hungrily. "They were to buy Damma, but she is dead. I saved and saved to buy her; a whole year it took me, and this morning when I went with the money in my palm for her, they could only show me where she was lying dead and cold upon the rocks. She was only a goat, look you, but she was my all." She threw out her hands with a little passionate gesture of despair.

"Here, give them to me," said the man. He clinked the coins in his hands, and then laughed aloud:

until the serene calm of the night entered into him, and woke his muse to life. Then high, sweet, and pure his voice rang forth through the rustling trees, that now seemed to grow silent beneath the witchery of his music.

A stranger, passing through the valley below, had heard the splendour of his voice as it rose bird-like, and cleft triumphantly the clear warm air. To him it seemed that some one invisible was imbued with a gift from Heaven. Entranced he stood and listened, until the last note died lingeringly away; then he came nearer, and searched the scented wood until he came face to face with this new Marsyas.

A simple boy half naked, and beautiful as one of those fair early gods who had turned Arcadian shepherds for the easier wooing of their earth-born loves. A very Apollo in rags, he found him seated on a fallen pine, with dreamy wistful eyes, and petulant mouth.

With gentle words and promises of coming glory he enticed and bought him, until the lad rose, dazzled, staggering, and held out his hands to him, as one imploring guidance, and swore to surrender himself to him body and soul, if he would but take him with him whithersoever he might go, and give him a chance of seeing realised even *one* of the fair visions he had conjured up.

There were more words, an assurance or two, and then the lad went down half mad with the in-

toxication of it all, to tell Zara that he was going from her into the unknown world.

"It means fame, wealth, honour," said the lad with glowing eyes, in which the fatal fever of ambition was already lit.

"It means death!" said she slowly, gazing at his hectic cheeks fired with eager hope; but he laughed her to scorn, and taking her in his arms, kissed her fondly once, and whispered to her of many things—of how he should come back to her rich, famous, renowned; but she answered him never a word. Then he thrust her angrily from him, and held out his hand to his new friend, and went eagerly up the hill with him to the new life for which he panted—the world that was to be won by his gift of song.

At the foot of the hill stood she, until the shadows hid him, and then she smote her hand upon her breast until the tender flesh ached, but no cry, however small, broke from her parched lips.

\* \* \* \*

Wearily, heavily went the day, and now it was eventide; and just such a tide as when he left her, five long years ago. Only the vaguest tidings of him had reached the quiet village all that time, though the world had rung with the fame of the new and marvellous tenor. Zara had blossomed into perfect womanhood, and had been sued and sought by many, in vain. Her great eyes had widened

upon most matters best left alone, in the little gossiping idle village to which she belonged. But though the world's mire had fallen upon her white soul, she had kept herself pure for very love of Lillo,—that strange fair boy whom she had bought, one summer long ago, on an evening such as this.

What an evening it was! Earth, sky, sea, all blended into one harmonious whole by the soft grey mist that, rising from the trembling ocean, pushed ever inland. The girl, struck by the glory of the scene—in its setting of red and gold and purple dyes, borrowed from earth and heaven—stood silent amidst the deepening shadows of the woods, listening to the river-song below: what was it saying? why was it ever calling, calling to her, as it rushed in its mad haste to the illimitable ocean?

She raised her hand to her brow to shut out from her the dying rays of the hot sun as though they hurt her. The corn was waving high around her. She stood in a scented bed of poppies and blue cornflowers and perfumed weeds, all whispering together as the light wind went and came their way. Ah! on such a night indeed he went! The remembrance like a stab wounded her poor heart and made it bleed afresh. She clenched her hands and turned her dark eyes moodily to the glowing sky, but she never said to herself that she would learn to forget. Nay! let *him* forget: women were born to be the sad thralls of cruel memory.

She turned her head a little and saw him standing beside her—a tall slender figure, careworn, travel-stained, with dust upon his sunny hair, and with hollowed cheeks and eyes full of a horrible brilliance. He was changed almost beyond recognition, but she knew him. With a quick, glad, mournful cry she went to him and laid her hands upon his shoulders.

"You—*you!*" she cried with a passionate outburst of relief and joy; and then she checked herself. "You are a little tired, dear heart," she said next, with a studied suppression of all surprise or excitement, though her heart beat as though it would rend her vest.

"Ay!" said he querulously. He did not touch her or seek to return the caressing pressure of her soft brown hands. "Tired? ay—to death."

"Come home then," she said, gently, leading him towards the old cave where once he had found shelter and an escape from servitude. At the word "home" he shuddered and shrank from her, and petulant tears, born of past joys bitter-sweet, rose in his feverish eyes. At this a deadly pallor crept over her face, but still she claved to him.

"Come," she said again, this time perhaps a little sternly, though still with deepest love, and he followed her. Alas! how bare to him looked the cold walls, the scanty comforts, the meagre supper.



With a shiver of disgust he flung himself upon a rude bench and muttered that he was cold—cold.

She lit some wood with deft fingers and poured him some goat's milk into a vessel which he drank ungratefully, and then silence fell between them.

"Why don't you speak?" cried he at last, angrily. "Why don't you jibe and jeer at me like the rest? Where is the fortune Fate had in store for me, of which I boasted to you so many times? There is *no* fortune—none. I come back to you beggared, empty-handed, a mendicant——"

"Nay, dear, but you *have* come back," she interrupted softly, stroking his hand. There was glad triumph in her tone.

"Because I had to," retorted he sullenly, as though eager to disenchant her and show himself in his worst colours. "As long as *life* was mine—the world's friendship, beauty's smiles, wine, colour, light—do you think I ever thought of this hovel or of you? I tell you a thousand times *no*! And yet," regarding her curiously, "you, too, are handsome—but—not as *she* was. *Her* eyes burned through me, until they drew my heart from out my very flesh and laid it writhing at her dainty feet. She held my soul within her palm; yet she, too, when the blight fell, cast me from her!"

In his excitement he tried to rise, but she, kneeling at his feet, restrained him.

"Forget all that," she said faintly, a cold, sick feeling, she knew to be despair, rendering her voice low and indistinct. "Tell me how it has been with *you*. Tell me of yourself—yourself *alone*," hurriedly. "We heard of your singing, even we here in this hidden village. It came to us as a strange breath from a strange land, telling us of your triumphs. Ah! but it was hard to think we could not witness them!"

"Yes, yes, I sang," he said hoarsely; "I sang until all other voices were silenced, until the world listened. It was a victory unparalleled—a triumphal march all through. Gold flowed at my feet, princes held out their hands to me, all men bowed speechless before the magic of my voice." He stood as one inspired. His cheek flushed: for the moment his glad young youth came back to him, pure, unsullied. "There were the crowded houses," he went on in a low rapt tone, speaking as one who sees some sight to other eyes unseen, "the lights, the music, the *hush!* and then the clapping of hands, the shouts. I go forth to them; flowers fall around me, I bow—I feel myself a god—and she——" All at once his manner changed, his head lowered, the *young* look vanished from his face. "And then one night," he said wearily, "something seemed to snap *here*," smiting his breast. "I felt a strange apathy

—some blood came—I forget——” He sank back again upon the bench as if exhausted.

“You are safe now: it will be well with you yet,” whispered she caressingly. “Here, amongst these quiet hills, you will regain your health, your strength, your voice. It will come again, sweeter, fuller than of old—and you will rejoice in it, and go forth again to your world—to——”

Her own voice failed her. Her head sank upon his knees. A sob burst from her dry lips—but he was lost in the beatific vision she had raised.

Presently, some thought occurring to him, he started, and remembered her.

“Are you married?” he asked nervously, as though in fear of her answer. She raised her head slowly, and looked at him. Something in the strength of her gaze troubled him, because his eyes drooped before hers.

“Married—ay—to a dream!” she said at length.

\* \* \* \*

He sickened, and grew weaker, hour by hour. The old fever was upon him again, mingled with that other consuming fire, slow but deadly. Day after day she nursed him with a secret delight in her recovered possession that overpowered all other thoughts. Not once during this sad week did slumber fall upon her eyelids, not once did he cry

aloud unheard. Her name was for ever on his parched lips. In his delirium he cried aloud for Zara—Zara—always Zara; until in her tired soul she rejoiced, and told herself the new life had not torn him altogether from her, and that the new love was forgotten. With hungry fear she listened to his ravings, for the sound of some fresh name unknown to her, that should tell her whither his thoughts wandered—but she never heard it.

At length upon the eighth day consciousness returned to him, and as towards evening she bent over him, striving to wet his dry lips with cooling drink, she raised her eyes and saw men standing in the doorway; no vagrants these, but clad in costly garments as becomes the minions of the rich.

"It is my lord!" said one of them, screwing up his eyes and bending forward, to cast a searching glance upon the languid Lillo. With a quick movement suggestive of apprehension, Zara stepped between the bed and the door, and spread out both her hands.

"Your business, sirs?" she asked, with frowning vehemence.

They had come, they said, for the Signor Lillo (by which name, no doubt, she knew him), to convey him to Florence by the Duke's orders.

"Stand back, you cannot have him. He is ill, *dying!*" she cried, threateningly waving them from her.

"It is a command," said the first man, shrugging his shoulders and coming a step nearer.

"But I tell you he cannot go—you shall not have him," she protested wildly. "He is mine—my own. I *bought* him."

At this they laughed a little, and then explained to her. His true birth had been discovered. He was no longer a waif to be wafted hither and thither on Fortune's wind, but a scion of an ancient house. His friends, the Duke himself, required his presence. They had been many days searching for him, and now at last had found him. No doubt she would be rewarded—the family was old and wealthy——

The fury that flashed into her eyes checked them there; they fell to mumbling, and at last were silent.

"In his need," she said with slow scorn, drawing her magnificent figure to its full height, "you all forsook him. When he was crushed and humbled to the earth," pointing her trembling fingers to the brown floor, "you all turned from him. He was beaten down by you and your masters, trodden upon, wounded to his heart's core, and then—*then* he thought of *me*." She threw out her arms with a gesture of unutterable pride and exultation. "He came back to me of his own accord. He is mine now for evermore. He has done with you, and

yours. He will not return to you. He told me so himself—he—the very night of his home-coming. He spurns you. He will stay here amongst the hills that sheltered him when first he came. What are your gauds and your briberies to a hurt soul like his? I tell you he will not go back to the world whence you came.”

Her eyes sparkled, her whole frame dilated: she defied them with a high courage, sure in her belief that she was speaking as he would have her speak, and that, in very truth, he was hers for ever.

A slight movement on the pallet behind her caught her attention; eagerly she turned to it. The sick man had raised himself with difficulty upon his elbow, and was holding out a shaking, transparent hand—*not* to her—to the group in the doorway!

“Nay! Heed her not—she lies!” he cried shrilly, in a voice strangely loud and clear. “I am not hers. I renounce her. Take me away from this horrible place to life—a new life—and freedom. I go!”

He dropped back upon his pillow. He had indeed gone to a new life.

\* \* \* \*

Zara, as though stricken to stone, stood motionless; gazing on the stiffening clay, an awful expression on her rigid features.

"He is dead," she said, without meaning. Her eyes were fixed immovably on the pale corpse, yet it was not the thought that never again would his voice strike on her ears, or his eyes show recognition of her coming, that had brought that stony look to her face. He had died repudiating her; with his last words he had appealed to strangers to *save* him from *her*—from *her* whose very heart's-blood would have been freely poured for him. In death as in life he had been ungrateful! A sudden sense of the *uselessness* of all things came to her like a flash!

They sought to take his body from her, but at first she resisted; it was her last feeble protest.

"He is mine—I bought him," she said again, foolishly; and then, wearily, "Nay, take him. He *would* go. You all heard him."

So she moved away; and then they lifted him, and made great moan over him, and carried him reverently, as befitted the going of one who, though in rags and in death, could still lay claim to an old name. With much pomp and ceremony they bore him from her sight, up the high hill, and far, far away.

Then she, too, stirred from her dream; she sighed, and cast one long lingering glance on the tiny cloud of dust, that was all that remained to her of the gloomy procession on the hill-top. She

moved a step or two, and wondered idly at the strange sweet fairness of the summer evening. Then she went swiftly towards the rushing river, that to-night seemed singing its weird song with expectant glee, and thought how loudly it was calling—calling! How clear it was, the music! A siren's song—a longed-for lullaby. Like a tired child she stretched her arms to it, and sank softly, lightly, gladly, into its embrace.

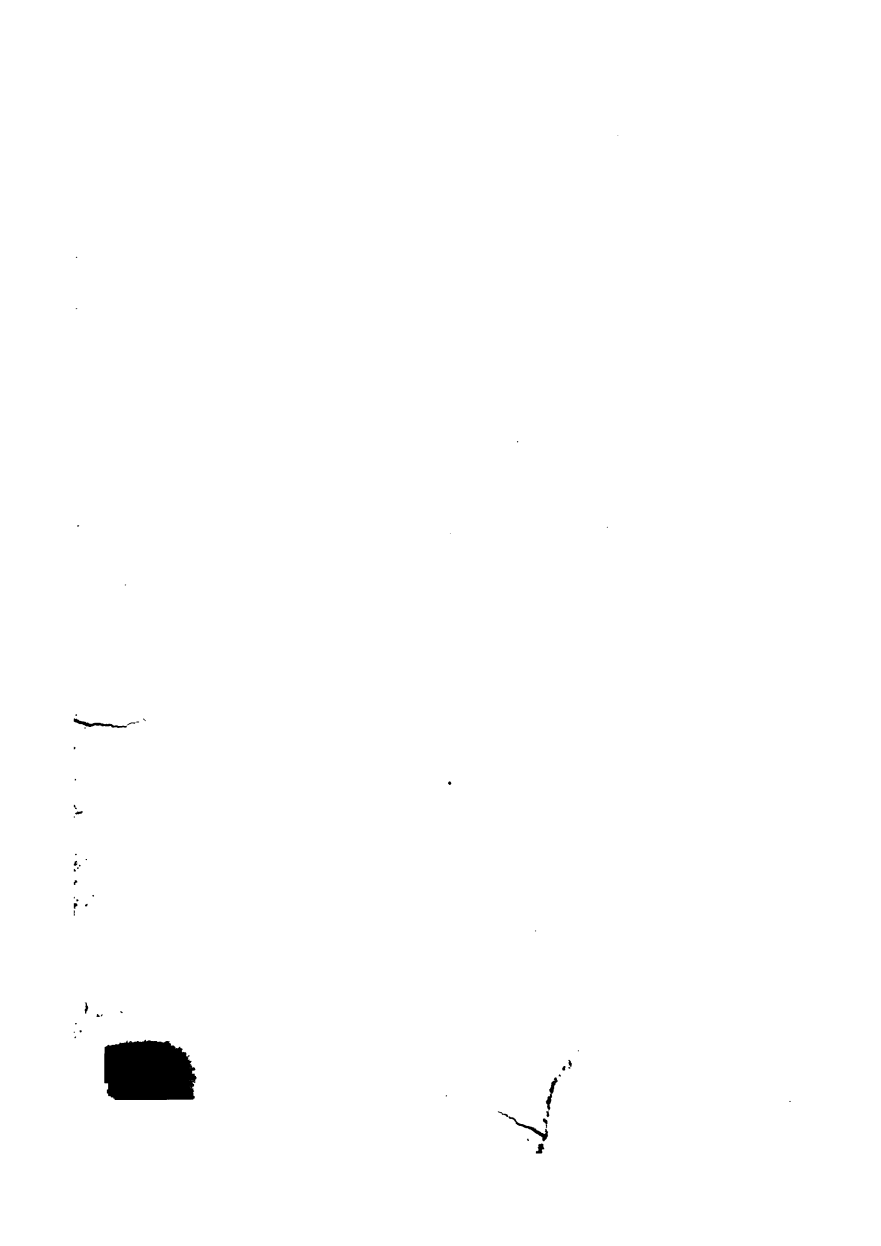
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**MOONSHINE AND MARGUERITES.**



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## MOONSHINE AND MARGUERITES.

### CHAPTER I.

"MY LOVE SHE'S BUT A LASSIE YET."

"It's a tremendously good thing for her," says Mr. Wilding. "She's got the match of the season. There she is, standing over there. Do you see? Little girl in white, with daisies all over her."

"Eh? Oh, yes," says Sir George, looking in quite the contrary direction at an overblown young thing of thirty or thereabouts,—not to be uncharitable.

"Not there, my dear fellow. . *There!*"

"Eh? Oh, yes, of course," says Sir George, in exactly the same tone. "Why, she's a child!"

"Barely seventeen. But her people put her up first chance on account of her remarkably fine eyes and the six sisters yet to come. Ponsonby's got a lot of money, and *looks* as if he adores her."

"He *does*," says Sir George, staring at the young beauty's present partner,—a stalwart Mephistopheles,

who is decidedly *épris* with her; "but she don't look as if she adored *him*,—eh?"

"*That* isn't her *fiancé*. He is lounging against the door-way on your right, talking to that tall dark girl in yellow,—Miss Nugent."

"Why on earth can't he talk to his *own* girl?" says Sir George, testily, who is growing angry at his many mistakes.

Mr. Wilding laughs. "Miss Nugent was very near being that," he says. "She is his cousin, an heiress in her own right, and, I dare say, the girl he *would* have married but for the *beaux yeux* of that little baby over there. The Ponsonbys had it all arranged. It's just another case of 'man proposes,' you know."

"You haven't told me the baby's name," says Sir George, who has never taken his eyes off her since first they fell on her.

"Disney,—Alys Disney."

"Her costume suits her. Is she a Marguerite?"

"Not Goethe's Marguerite," says Wilding, coldly and with a half-frown.

"I meant nothing half so indelicate, believe me," says Sir George, with an amused smile: "you need not ruffle your feathers like that. I meant only one of those charming, innocent field-flowers one sees sometimes in—er—Birket Foster's pictures, and that. I'm told they grow in meadows; but I never saw a meadow: beastly bumpkins always cut

'em down before one can get to the country. There's something—er—very special about her mouth, isn't there,—eh?"

"I really don't know," says Mr. Wilding. "Come into the supper-room and have something. I feel awfully used up."

Taking forcible possession of the little baronet, he pilots him successfully through massive dowagers and languishing wall-flowers to the room beyond without making a mistake. Mr. Wilding is a young man of much merit, whose manner ladies call "invaluable" and girls "charming." By these last he is regarded as a general favourite,—principally, perhaps, because, though now twenty-nine, he has never yet selected from among them a *particular* favourite. He is still all their own, and belongs to everybody because he belongs to nobody.

By the time he and his companion have gained the happy land of chicken and champagne, it occurs to Sir George Grande that he had not wanted to come.

"I wish you hadn't shown such senseless haste," he says. "I hadn't half done looking at that little girl in the daisies. She's pretty."

"Don't give yourself airs," says Wilding. "Pretty! She's *the* new Beauty! with a great big B. Don't make a mistake about it. You are to rave whenever you hear her name mentioned, or they will argue you unknown."

"I wish they would," says Sir George, with a faint grimace. "I've put in my year abroad, like a good little boy; but the welcome accorded me by the duchess on my return could hardly be called scorching."

"One's own people are always the hardest on one's little peccadilloes," says Mr. Wilding, staring at his glass.

"I call it real nasty of her, anyway," says Sir George, "considering it was to please her I cleared out and lost my season last year."

"Well, you know you *had* been going it a bit," says Wilding, apologetically. "Two fortunes, by Jove! before you were twenty-six; and—and that other little affair. But I think, now your banishment is at an end, open censure should be at an end too. I gave your sister credit for better feeling."

"She's one of the goody-goodies. Never expect anything from them but a scandal in the long run. And when they do give place to the devil, it is with a vengeance. Charity, because it is the greatest, is the rarest of all virtues, and the duchess lacks it. However, I am independent of her and all since I came in for the Trevor estates. I wonder how long this third fortune will last me! Eh, Wilding? Never mind; let's talk about that pretty child up-stairs. Know her?"

"She is my cousin," says Wilding.

"Then she is 'a dangerous thing,' as some old rhyme says,—and justly so in this case, I should say; though I believe *you* are fire-proof. Take me back to the ball-room and introduce me to her."

"You have proved yourself anything but fire-proof, and she is a forbidden sweet," says Wilding. "Better keep your fingers out of the blaze."

"But, alas! she is another's, and she never can be mine! that is what you mean,—eh?" says Sir George, laughing with exceeding light-heartedness. "Well, I'll risk even that; and if I fall beneath her chariot-wheels, my blood be on my own head."

Still Mr. Wilding palpably hesitates.

"Not moral enough for sweet seventeen; is *that* it?" says his friend, with a very faint sneer. "Don't try to disguise the fact, old man: one can read it on your ingenuous countenance. You will never reach the woolsack, Wilding, if you give way to your emotions like this."

"You go something beyond the mark," says Wilding, reflectively.

"Do I? I am willing—nay, *anxious*—to believe you. Make me known to your cousin, then. I swear"—half mockingly—"I will be as good as gold in her sainted presence, and never once cease to remember that she has been labelled as 'a *good* man's bride.'"

"Come, then. A promise is a promise," says Wilding.



And presently they find themselves face to face with Miss Disney and her intended, in a small conservatory, and Sir George has the pleasure of knowing that Miss Disney is now in full possession of the fact that his name is Grande.

He has taken her card, and now says, "May I?" standing before her with pencil uplifted, waiting her permission to engrave his name thereon.

"With pleasure," says Miss Disney courteously, but indifferently. With the young, however, it is as natural to smile as to breathe: so she smiles at him.

Having made his own of this careless concession on her part, Sir George lets his eyes wander back again to her programme. "It sounds incredible," he says at length, "but it seems as if you are disengaged for *this* dance. I can see no name before it. If so, may I have it?"

"*Am* I disengaged?—then yes," returns she, thoughtlessly.

"You are engaged to *me* for the next," interferes Ponsonby at this moment, in a dull but hurried tone which he strives hard to relieve from a suspicion of offence.

"Yes? Is it? But of *course*. I quite forgot. The next, then, Sir George, for which I am free, which will be the fourteenth,—if we stay so long. You see," bending slightly toward him with a

childish, restless movement, "I *never* put down Mr. Ponsonby's name."

"I quite understand," says Sir George with a gesture of the hand and a smile. And then the interview is over, and Miss Disney is in her lover's arms, waltzing languidly to the strains of the band sent down to the castle from town.

He cuts the dance somewhat short, and draws her, not unwillingly, to the open window of a room that, leading to the balcony, is suggestive of an easy descent by stone steps to the *pleasaunce* beneath.

Into the night and into the slumberous garden he leads her, where mignonette and late sweet roses give forth unconscious perfume to the drowsy air.

A pale young moon is hanging in the heavens above, her beams falling tenderly upon the sleeping earth. Ever and anon a fleecy cloud glides over her, threatening to blot her from her place; but again, ere doubt has time for growth, it hurries on, and,—

Melting like a wreath of snow, it hangs  
In folds of wavy silver round, and clothes  
The orb with richer beauties than her own,—  
Then, passing, leaves her in her light serene.

"Do you feel the softness of the air?" says the girl, turning to him with a touch of impulsive gladness in her tone. "I like a garden at midnight, and I like the country better than the town. The

season wearied me. It was always the same. Monotony, some say, belongs altogether to fields and woods and streams; but it is not really so. Here everything speaks to me; it is only those others who cannot understand——” Here she checks herself, as though some sudden recollection returns to her. “Are you laughing at me?” she says. “I am, I *know*, in one of the moods auntie calls funny. Well, even if you do smile at my folly, I shan’t mind *you*. Look at these garden-marguerites; are they not lovely in the moonlight? Wait. Let me try your fortune with one.” She plucks it petal by petal, murmuring, as she does so, the old refrain, “He loves me—a little—indifferently—passionately—not at all.” As the last leaf comes, it brings her “indifferently.” “Oh, you bad boy!” she says; “and after all your protestations.”

“It is a lying prophet,” says Ponsonby, who is a tall grave young man of twenty-seven, with very loving grey eyes, sensitive lips, and an earnest expression. He looks decidedly older than he is, whilst she, who is only seventeen, looks decidedly younger.

“Well, it is only natural you should make out a good story for yourself,” she says, with a mischievous glance. Now to see how *she* regards *you*.” She picks another marguerite from the group near her as she speaks, and, as she flings its mutilated remains away, says gayly, “She loves you.”

"There! that is more than you deserve: you have got the best assurance of all, to *my* thinking. 'Passionately' is such rubbish. Don't you think so?"

"I am not sure," says Mr. Ponsonby, with his eyes on hers.

"No? Well, I hope you don't love *me* passionately, because I should hate it. There is such a pretence about it. It is mere sound. One can't pass perfection, you know. I know *I* couldn't love any one to distraction, as they call it, to save my life. Oh, *listen* to that nightingale!" She turns from him and gazes with eager eyes in the direction whence comes that heavenly music, while her lover gazes at her with eyes into which a certain sadness has fallen.

There she stands, a flower among her fellows, radiant, beautiful, in the clear light of the pure moon,—such a child!—with her little curly head and smiling lips and large, dewy eyes. Already where are her thoughts?—flying—flying ever,—now to sweet Philomel, now perchance to——

She has given herself to him, but is she *really* his? The body minus the soul is but a sorry bargain, and whether he has ever honestly touched her heart has been a question with the young man ever since that first day when she promised to be his.

"Your cousin looks as if *she* could," she says, turning, not so much suddenly as with a certain sense of vitality, toward him.

"Could what?"—with a start.

"Love passionately. Katherine Nugent, I mean."

"Oh! Do you think she could?" His manner is still a little vague.

"Yes. Do you know, Frank," coming a little nearer to him, "sometimes I have thought she is in love with *you*?"

"Nonsense, darling!"

"I *have* thought it. *Is* it nonsense?"

"Utter. If you were right, you must confess she has a singular way of showing her attachment. Only yesterday,"—with a light laugh,—"*something* cutting in her manner made me tell myself I was an object of positive aversion to her."

"Still, I *thought* it," says Alys, with all a child's wilful persistence. "But, of course, I was wrong." Then, "*Why* didn't *you* fall in love with *her*?"

"Because you came to me."

"Was that your only reason? See, now, what mischief I have done. She would have suited you better than I shall."

- "That is the one point on which I will not give in to you."

"She is clever, and handsome, and——"

"Dear heart, you are all that, and a thousand other things besides."

"A thousand bad things, I dare say; whereas she—she seems to lack nothing."

"Beyond the crowning imperfection that she is not—you!"

"And yet——" She pauses, and casts at him a glance swift but anxious from under her long lashes. "Sometimes I vex you, don't I?" she says, dropping her lids again.

"No——" he is beginning, but she stops him with a merry little gesture.

"Let us have the whole truth, and nothing but it," she says, with a charming smile. "You were angry with me only twenty minutes ago."

"When, my dearest?"

"When I forget my dance—*this* dance—with you; and again when I promised Sir George Grande one later on. Deny it if you dare."

"How did you know that?"

"Your eyes told me. Ah!"—laughing softly,—  
"I can see things sometimes."

"You are a little witch. I confess all. Your forgetting grieved me sorely; but, besides that, I didn't like you to dance with Sir George."

"But why?"

"For many reasons——" He hesitates. Why raise unlovely thoughts in the mind of this tender child?

"He looks as if he could be amusing," says she, carelessly; "and he is staying here with us, you know. He came this morning, and will be here all the week. And auntie says Lady Fanny Davenport is very anxious to marry him."

"Is she? Well, never mind. Let us forget him. *You* are going to marry me, are you not? And soon, darling?"

"I think so," says Miss Disney, with the utmost serenity. "Mamma says Maudie can't come out until I am got out of the way: so it is unfair to her to delay *too* long. And it is all the same to you, I suppose, isn't it?"—anxiously.

The humour of this naïve remark might have struck the young man but for something else that strikes him still more keenly, and that has *no* humour in it: a shade saddens his face.

"Is it to please Maudie or me you give so ready a consent?" he says, a tinge of bitterness in his tone. It may be that the girl marks it and resents it. At least she turns from him with a gesture that is petulant.

"Perhaps to please myself more than either," she says; and, though the words might be made to convey a compliment, the delivery of them spoils the effect.

"You love me?" asks Ponsonby, suddenly turning to her and taking her hand.

"Still a sceptic? Has not this mystic flower assured you of my truth?"—nodding her small head at the marguerites hard by. "*I* should be the one to doubt, considering the dreadful tale it told me!"

"If ever," says Ponsonby, drawing her close to him, "you should feel that the—the affection you

now bear me is less than you imagined it, and that you could"—growing very pale—"give your heart more entirely to another, promise me you will let me know of it in some way, by some word, or sign, or token."

"I couldn't promise to be as rude as that," returns she, mischievously.

"Be serious for once," entreats he. Something in his tone touches her. The smile fades from her lips, leaving only a certain sweet reflection of it behind. Coming closer to him, she lifts one bare round arm and with very tender little fingers smoothes back the hair from his brow.

"There is no need for me to make such a promise," she says, "because I shall never have to tell you *that*."

"Nevertheless, promise!"

"A wilful man must have his way." You have my promise, then; but not in words shall I redeem it. When I have learned to hate you, I will send you one of *these*"—again pulling a marguerite from the tall bunch growing near—"with 'not at all' as its last petal. Poor flower!" compassionately apostrophizing it, "what a sad mission I should send it on! Do you know, I never invoked my fortune with one of these until I tried it to-night with you?"

"I am glad of that; and"—eagerly—"you never will again, will you?"

"Why, how *can* I now?" says Miss Disney, with



uplifted brows. "My fortune is told: *you* are it. How funny that sounds? it puts you in the neuter gender at once!"

"I shan't see you again for a week," says Ponsonby suddenly. "I go to town by the early train. You will not forget me during my absence?"

"No. Take this with *you*, to remind you of *me*, every moment, until we meet again,"—she places the marguerite in his coat as she speaks,—“and, when you look at it, remember the message it brought you,” she says, coquettishly.

"For that reason its whole tribe shall be sacred to me for evermore," says Ponsonby, with a smile that lights his face into actual beauty.

## CHAPTER II.

### "WHOSE TONGUE OUTVENOMS ALL THE WORMS OF NILE."

"It is mid-day, and all the world is mad and merry with excess of sunshine and the myriad harmonies of nature's gigantic choir. Even through the carefully-closed curtains of Indian muslin that shade the morning room at Moorlands, great Sol is penetrating, rendering the air hot and languorous.

"I have come to a conclusion," says Miss Disney, suddenly, sinking back in her huge arm-chair, that might easily entomb her, and flinging her arms with lazy grace above her head.

"Yes?" The answer, which is half a question, comes in low soft accents across the misty, hazy heat that fills the room, yet with a suspicion of veiled insolence about it. It comes from a beautiful mouth, however, and Katherine Nugent, as she utters the unpleasing monosyllable, turns calm, dark eyes upon her cousin's *fiancée*.

The *fiancée* moves restlessly, and a faint colour creeps into her *mignon* face.

"I suppose," she says, with a rather shy laugh, "that a conclusion coming from me (involving, as it must, some thought) may be regarded in the light of an eighth wonder. Is that what your tone meant?"

"And the conclusion?" asks Katherine, tranquilly, and with all the air of one who has heard nothing of the foregoing protest.

"Is—that to night will never come. Was there ever such a long, long day?"

"You miss Frank,"—shortly.

"No: do I? Perhaps so. I am not sure. I was not thinking of him."

"Yet he is a man to make himself remembered even when out of sight."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"Katherine," says the younger girl, suddenly, "how often you get me to speak of Frank! Sometimes I have thought—but of course it was only fancy. You never *did* care for him in *that way*, did you?"

"The way *you* care for him? Never."

"I am so glad I asked you, now. If you had given me a different answer it would have made me very unhappy."

"That is a very kindly speech. But you need suffer no generous pangs of regret for me. Frank is as little to me as I am—to him." She shades her eyes with her hand for a moment, perhaps to conceal a smile, for presently she breaks into a low laugh, suggestive of amusement to her listener. "What put the silly thought into your head?" she asks.

"I hardly know."

"Somebody must have done it." Again there is the carelessly-veiled insolence of tone, the contemptuous disbelief in her companion's sagacity or penetration.

"Somebody, I dare say," says the girl, musingly. "Perhaps——" she pauses.

"Was it *he*?" The words came from her with exceeding sharpness, as though forced to her lips by some terrible thought that has just pierced her brain and brought with it an agony too keen to be silently endured.

"Oh, no!"

"You are *sure*?"—still fiercely, with pale lips, and dark eyes alight with passionate fear.

"You will see how sure, when I tell you that Frank believes you positively dislike him. He told

me so last night. Now,"—laughing,—“I think he was right. How angry your eyes have grown at the bare mention of his name!”

“Ah!” says Miss Nugent. It is a sigh of relief that escapes her. She leans back in her chair, and a great wave of colour sweeps over her white face. She unfurls her huge black fan with a little crashing noise.

“You haven’t told me how you enjoyed last night,” she says quickly, as a means of covering her confusion.

“So much!” says the young girl, smiling, and throwing some animation into her air.

“I saw you dancing rather frequently with Sir George Grande toward the close of the evening.”

“Twice I danced with him, I think. Do you know, I quite like him, though Frank doesn’t?”

“Men like Frank, who have been through a good deal, are always inclined to be jealous. Experience has taught them how transient a love-affair *may* be.”

“You mean”—emotionally—“that Frank has loved so often that——”

“I mean nothing. There is really no occasion for any excitement. But of course you will understand that a man cannot grow to Frank’s age without having played with fire. There is nothing to render you uneasy in anything I have said.”

“I am not uneasy,”—flushing warmly.

"No? But of course not. There is really nothing in it."

"I know that," says the girl loyally, yet even as she says it her heart grows heavier within her. There *is* really nothing in it; but *why* had he *told* her she was his first and only love? Perhaps men always said that to the object of their latest fancy.

"Once last night when you were dancing with Frank," she says, turning to Miss Nugent, and recovering her self-possession by an effort, "I looked at you, and both you and he were looking at me. Was he talking of me then?"

"Does he ever talk of anything else? A man *freshly* in love is the most selfish thing on earth. Later on they grow more considerate, and can afford to forget the beloved angel now and then."

"Can they?"—wistfully. Will Frank indeed learn to forget her at times?

"Yes. What were we saying just then? You asked me if he was talking of you? Yes, entirely. He was telling me of something you had said,—I forget what now,—and he was laughing. He called you 'such a child,' I remember. It was some silly little trifle, amusing because of its crudity. He is very devoted to you."

Again the sting is in her tone. It makes the girl's lips quiver and brings the light of rebellion to her beautiful eyes.

"At seventeen one is not a child. You make

me think he spoke of me as a doll, a baby, a mere plaything."

"Oh, *no!* Merely as a *very* young girl. You *are* young to *him*, you know: he is quite ten years your senior."

"The advantage there is on my side, surely,"—haughtily. "If *I* don't mind it, he need not."

"Quite so. I think every woman should be ten years or so younger than her husband," says Katherine, who is just six months younger than Ponsonby. "And as for him, I *know* he prefers extreme youth. It is easier to mould and form."

She closes her fan with another click, drops it languidly into her lap, and smiles faintly.

"‘To mould’!" The girl's tone has grown strangely cold and calm. "I am to be educated to his will, you mean?"

"Well, that was what he said——"

"*Said?*"

"My dear child, I can't remember the exact words, but he told me last night he had gained a treasure,—one of those rare beings to whom the world is unknown. He dreaded no rival, he said, because,—I really forget the ‘because,’ but it was something to the effect that, as you had not dreamed of lovers until he came on the scene, they were not necessary to you, and all that. I told him not to be too certain,"—laughing,—“but he quite scoffed at the thought that you could prefer any one to his

royal highness. After all, I doubt if it is a wise thing to let a man feel *too* sure of one."

"Is *that* how he talks of me to you?" says Alys, with a glance of cold disdain from her heavily-fringed eyes. To really know any one is difficult; and to view one's dearest friend in a different light is to regard him as a stranger. "We have been prosing a good deal, have we not? I am afraid I have made the day even duller for you than it really is."

"Perhaps it is my fault," says Miss Nugent politely.

"Impossible! You have tried your best to enliven me, and if you have failed it is *my* fault. It is the heat, I suppose. Who could have believed in so hot a sun in September?"

Miss Nugent, as though scenting sarcasm in this speech, glances at her sharply; but the girl has risen and has averted her face, and, after a languid attempt at further conversation, quits the room.

When the men come in from shooting, however, she reappears in a charming pale-pink tea-gown, and as Sir George flings himself upon the lounge close beside her she turns to him with new graciousness, and lets her lovely eyes smile into his, and draws away her skirts that he may nestle even nearer to her.

"She is rehearsing her new *rôle*," says Katherine Nugent, taking in all this from afar, with a curl of

her lips, and a shrug of her handsome shoulders, and a most unlovely smile of devilish gratification.

### CHAPTER III.

"LOVE! THOU ART CRUEL!"

AT the end of the third day Sir George Grande is as much in love with Miss Disney as his nature will permit. At the end of the week, and when the night is come that is to see the return of Mr. Ponsonby, he has overstepped that limit, and is making an open ass of himself about the youthful beauty—*not* without encouragement! For Mademoiselle l'Ingénue during these seven days has developed into a subdued but dangerous coquette.

Ponsonby, who has arrived barely in time to change his clothes for dinner (but who has been nevertheless bitterly disappointed that no gracious childish form has met him on his arrival to bid him welcome), coming into the drawing-room twenty-five minutes past seven, is somewhat taken aback by the tableau that there presents itself to him.

Upon a couch, half shrouded by the lace curtains of the window near it from public view, sits his promised wife, looking lovely as a dream, in Indian muslin and filmy laces, Sir George Grande beside her. The latter is stooping forward, gazing



intently into her eyes. Upon every line of his good-looking face hopeless infatuation is written.

Ponsonby, advancing slowly as one walking in his sleep, knocks inadvertently against a spider-legged chair and sends it to the ground with some noise.

Miss Disney starts, looks round, and, seeing who it is who is coming toward them, colours deeply. It is only a momentary emotion, however, and, conquering it, she rises swiftly, but with inherent grace, from her seat, and goes to meet him. Her self-possession is complete.

“You have come?” she says, with a smile most lovely, but studiously indifferent.

“Yes.” If his life depended upon it, Ponsonby could say no more. He is feeling stunned, bewildered, lost! Here is this girl, whom he had left believing her his own, standing before him now in all her radiant beauty, clothed in careless smiles, and with a touch of something new (is it triumph?) upon her parted lips. He turns away, sick at heart.

Finding her alone later on in the evening, he says quietly, “You and Sir George seem to be quite good friends.”

“I like him very much,” she says gently enough, but with a grain of defiance in her tone which he is not slow to mark.

“*That* I can see for myself,” he says, with a

rather forced smile. "What an atom out of eternity is a bare week! and yet——"

"You found it short, then?"—glancing at him with a half frown.

"Never mind me," he says impatiently. "What of *you*?"

"Why should *I* submit to an examination from which *you* shrink?" retorts she with some *hauteur*, throwing up her dainty head, and making a smile from Lady Newport, who is sitting directly opposite, an excuse for leaving him.

"What a heavenly night!" says Miss Nugent suddenly, as, drawing back the curtains, she lets a rush of glorious moonlight flood the room. "And the air,—how soft and warm! Why not come into the gardens and enjoy it, as we have done every night for the past week? You and Sir George, Alys, used to be the first to propose it. Now"—smiling—"you basely throw the responsibility upon my shoulders."

"Far be it from us," says Sir George lightly. "Class us not among the backsliders. There is something about Miss Disney that always suggests to me a kinship with Diana; not for one moment, therefore, would she, I feel convinced, dream of casting a slight upon her illustrious relative. You will come and pay your accustomed court to her, will you not, Miss Disney?"

For a moment she hesitates; almost a refusal is

on her lips, when her eyes chance to fall on Ponsonby's. In his there is open though unconscious rebuke, and it turns the scale in Sir George's favour.

"Come," she says, holding out her hand to him with a sweet smile prettily tinged with coquetry, and together they step lightly from the drawing-room to the balcony, and from thence to the gardens—lit by the "wandering moon" to a transparent brilliancy—that lie beneath, wrapt in sleep. The others follow.

Ponsonby, as though compelled thereto by some iron demon, moves in their train, speaking such idle trash as society demands, even from the heavy-hearted, to Katherine Nugent. But his whole soul is centred on the form of the little wilful girl flitting before him, now nearer, now a long way off, now fading away altogether in the embrace of some amorous shadow, only to reappear again in a patch of purest moonlight.

At last he really loses sight of her. Two or three people coming up to Katherine engross her in some merry argument and will not let her go. Glad at heart at this chance of being once more alone, Ponsonby moves away from the group, stepping out from it silently.

Seeing this, Katherine says gently but hastily, "Go and see the eastern end of the gardens, Frank: it will reward you; it is lovely in this light. You

know it?—that little bit apart, where the old statue of Apollo stands half shrouded in ivy?”

Does he know it? How well he remembers how he stood there with *her* a week ago and had a sweet but lying tale told him by a marguerite! No, he will *not* go there again! And yet some fascination draws him through the scented dew and glittering beams to the spot where, seven days ago, he had at least been happy in the thought that he was without a rival; and now——

*Now!* He had reached Apollo's shrine with downcast eyes; but the sound of voices near compels him to lift his head. As he does so, he starts, and turns deadly pale. There, in her clinging white gown, scarcely less fair than the moonbeams that riot round her, stands the girl he loves, a freshly-plucked marguerite in her hand, and beside her Sir George Grande.

Is it a ray from her high-born kinswoman, or what is it, that makes her appear so pale? She is plucking the flower petal by petal, and once again the old-world refrain comes to Ponsonby across the fragrant sward, borne upon the wings of the night-wind, “She loves you a little,—indifferently—passionately——”

“Ah! cruel flower! why will it not stop there?” says Sir George sentimentally.

At this moment the hand that holds the flower droops, and the girl, raising her head, looks calmly

and defiantly into Ponsonby's eyes. There is no surprise in her glance, no shrinking: it is as if she had known he was there even before she looked.

Thus for an indefinable period they gaze at each other, and then he lowers his eyes, and, turning, walks slowly away.

"That was Ponsonby," says Sir George, screwing his glass into his best eye the better to discern the retreating figure.

"I know it."

"Ah! you saw him before I did?"

"I saw him as he came."

"Yes?"—airily,—“you would, you know: there's such a lot of him. Modern Hercules, and all that sort of thing. Good fellow, Ponsonby, though. Capital fellow, don't you think,—eh? but a trifle dreary. Looks as if he has the toothache just now, don't he?"

"No, he '*don't*'!" says Miss Disney, answering him in his own sweet English, but with a sudden and unexpected change of tone—from lively to severe.

"Very good, then: he *don't*," replies Sir George, totally unabashed. "Let's forget him. I've set my heart on hearing my fortune told me to-night by you, and beneath these mystic moonbeams, and as yet you have only got half-way. Try again."

"No,—*never* again!" cries she passionately, crushing the poor flower in her slender grasp and flinging

it far from her. There is such startling vehemence in both her tone and gesture that Sir George loses his glass and his self-possession simultaneously. Before he can recover either, she has run away from him, and is lost among the shadows that lie lurking in the secret places of the laurels.

"By Jove! what a small tornado!" says the baronet, staring after her with uplifted brows. "A good deal of temper, no doubt, but all round—charming!"

Panting,—hopelessly out of breath,—Miss Disney gains her chamber and locks her door. Whilst running in, she has made up her mind she will not appear below again to-night. She is tired,—yes, yes; she will go to bed. With hurried fingers (as though action is necessary to her in her frame of mind) she undresses herself, says her prayers, looks into her Bible (a very little look to-night, I am afraid), and finally, finding herself standing in her dainty night-gown, goes up to a tall cheval-glass in the corner of the room and gazes at her own lovely image therein.

Her cheeks are still flushed by her run; her lips are red and parted, her soft eyes full of a defiance that is most foreign to them.

"At last I have shown him I am not a mere baby, to be moulded as he wills, and that a rival is not an actual impossibility," says this silly child to herself; all the while her heart is breaking with

suppressed pain, and a wild desire to run to "him" and throw herself into his arms and confess to him how eagerly she longs to be friends with him again.

Yet bravely she keeps back the emotion that threatens to overpower her, and, still encouraging vengeful thoughts, slips into her lavender-scented sheets,—a thing as white as they.

#### CHAPTER IV.

"TREASON DOTH NEVER PROSPER."

BUT calm sleep, and morning, bring a more heavenly frame of mind. The extreme nervousness she feels at the thought of being obliged to meet him soon again face to face, and the painfully distant greeting accorded to her by him when they do meet at breakfast-time, both combined, reduce Miss Disney to a state bordering on tears and penitence.

Yet luncheon and dinner-hours arrive without action of any sort having been taken; and it is only when the first *entrée* has gone round (which, though excellent, has been discovered by her to be utterly tasteless) that a way of escape occurs to her.

To tell him in simple English that she is sorry has long been found to be out of the question; but there is another very graceful little plan that suggests itself to her, and is carried *nem. con.*, and passes from a thought into a resolution.

That little episode last night he will surely forgive her. He must have *felt* she only did it through childish spleen. She will send him a carefully-selected marguerite that will finish with "she loves you."

Going to her room directly she gets out of the dining-room, she selects from among a large bunch of flowers upon her table a giant daisy, and counts it eagerly. Plucking off those that mar her design, she leaves it with the desired reading for the last petal, and then goes slowly down stairs again. But at the last step her courage fails her. He has looked so cold, so unloving, all day, that she dares not give it to him herself. Even as she hesitates with this new trouble at her heart, Katherine Nugent crosses the hall below her.

In a flash it occurs to her that *here* is a way out of her difficulty. "Katherine!" she calls softly. "Katherine!"

"Well?" says Miss Nugent, pausing.

"I want"—hurriedly—"to *tell* you something,—to *ask* you to do me a great favour. You are *his* cousin and *my* friend, are you not? And—and I *must* speak to somebody; and auntie is so impossible."

"Well?" says Miss Nugent again.

"Will you listen to me for a little while?"

"Certainly." The word is uttered with studious politeness. "What is it?"



What it is—the primary cause of all the disturbance, the enlargement of the quarrel, and the means to be now employed with a view to restoring the old harmony existing between them—is soon laid bare to Miss Nugent.

“And now I want Frank to know it was all a mistake, and that I still love him dearly,—*dearly*. You know I do.”

“I know nothing,” says Miss Nugent, stonily. “Well, go on.”

“He once called this flower *sacred* to us,—for—for a certain reason,” goes on Alys tremulously, her eyes bent sadly upon the marguerite in her hand. “And I thought if I sent him one with ‘she loves you’ coming on the last petal it would tell him everything. Would it not?”—wistfully.

“You know him so much better than I do that you can answer that question more satisfactorily for yourself. He is in the billiard-room. Are you going there now to give it to him?”

“I—I *can’t*,” says the girl, with a sudden accession of shyness, colouring violently. “Katherine,”—desperately,—“will *you* give it to him for me?”

“Me! You ask *me*!” says Katherine, growing deadly pale and recoiling from her.

“If you will, dearest,” says the girl timidly.

“Ask *any* one but me,” says Miss Nugent in a low but vehement tone, throwing out her hands with a passionate gesture. Then, the necessity for com-

posure recurring to her, she makes a supreme effort, and in some measure regains calmness. "Take it yourself," she says slowly; but her tone is harsh and strained. As yet she cannot altogether command herself.

"I—I should be ashamed to go to him now," says the young girl, with a blush and an abashed laugh. "Katherine, *do* help me. He is in the billiard-room: take him this flower, and tell him I shall be in the library in five minutes. I am going there now."

"You persist in asking me to do this?" says Miss Nugent in a strange tone.

"I don't *insist*,"—gently,—*"I only entreat you. There, go, like a dear girl; and—and be sure you take the flower with great care, as the loss of a petal would be fatal. You think me foolish, don't you,"* she says, blushing again as she misconstrues the fixed expression on her companion's features.

"I think you are mad," says Katherine slowly. "Give me the flower, then. I will take it,—if I can." The last words, uttered in a falling tone, are unheard by Alys as she moves away to the library, there to wait with beating heart the coming and the pardon of her lover.

Left alone in the large hall, Katherine stands motionless, staring vacantly at the pale marguerite. There appears to be in it some horrible fascination for her. Her eyes are riveted upon it; her lips

twitch; slowly (as though deterred by some hidden power) her other hand creeps toward it.

Almost as she touches it she pauses, and a shudder passes over her. With a heavy sigh that is almost a sob, she resolutely throws up her head, thus withdrawing her eyes from the flower, and at the same time places the hand that holds it behind her back, as though to remove it from her gaze.

A struggle short but sharp goes on within her. So powerful is it that her whole frame trembles beneath it. Then a face, childish, trusting, pleading, rises before her, and she moves with hurried footsteps in the direction of the billiard-room, still with the flower hidden from her view. But, almost as she turns the handle of the door, a voice from within, reaching her, kills the good so lately born. It brings before her another face,—the face of the man she loves passionately though hopelessly,—and, with a groan, she falls back from the door, and, her nerves ceasing to be under her control, the arm so persistently heretofore kept behind her falls again into its usual position, so bringing her eyes once more on the fatal flower.

Is *she* to be the one to give this baby to his arms?—she, whose vaguest thought of him contains more passion than the warmest this petulant child has ever known? Again the half-shy, half-tender, girlish face comes before her; but this time she shakes the apparition from her with a frown. Pshaw!

she would forget in a month this mawkish love of hers, and would be ready to love again in her poor fashion. And yet—there was something in those large blue eyes that——

She hesitates for one heaven-born moment, and then is lost.

Deliberately plucking one white petal from the marguerite, she opens the door of the billiard-room, and, with a smile and a calm word or two to some man who addresses her, moves with languid grace to where Ponsonby is standing somewhat apart from the others.

“Do you remember that book of James’s we were discussing last night?” she says. “I can’t think where I put it. Have you any idea?”

“I think you took it up-stairs with you.”

“Oh, did I? I dare say. It is just the most possible places one never searches. Thank you. The fact of not being able to get it has made me long for it with the greater intensity for the last hour.” She turns, as if to go away, then turns back again, as though in sudden remembrance of some trivial thing. “I had nearly forgotten,” she says carelessly, “but your little *fiancée* asked me to give you this as I met her on my way here just now.” She holds out to him, as she says this, the frail blossom in her hand, now drooping as though sad at heart because of the treachery of which it is the unwilling agent.

“From Alys?” says Ponsonby, a flush born of

emotion darkening his face in spite of his desperate resolve to show none.

"Yes. She desired me also to tell you she would be in the library any time from this. A lover's tryst,"—with a light laugh.—"To take my revenge *now*, Captain Sartoris? Well, I don't mind. Sir George to play with me against you and Lady Newport? Charming! Consider yourselves beaten before you begin. I feel that victory rests with me to-night."

There is an exultant ring in her voice as she takes up her cue with a hand steady as marble, and as cold. It is the hand that a moment since held the mutilated marguerite.

The flush has died from Ponsonby's face, leaving only a deathly pallor in its place, and a smile replete with scorn for his own weakness. In eager, hopeful anticipation he had plucked the petals one by one from the flower sent by the love he now deems false, only to find the bitter assurance that she loves him "not at all" at its end.

How had it ever come to pass that he had given the entire happiness of his life into the keeping of this girl, who as the hour changed went with it and in a few short days had discovered a new lover? That she should have chosen a marguerite, the flower he had consecrated as sacred to her and him, as a means of conveying to him her altered sentiments, has hurt him in a terribly cruel manner. There is a lack of refinement in it that strikes a chill to his heart.

Still holding the flower in his hand, he crosses the billiard-room to the door, as blind to Katherine Nugent's keen glance as he is deaf to Lady Newport's honeyed speech, and goes straight to the library, where, by her own word, "*she*" is awaiting him to have her liberty restored to her. Surely it is not *his* part to delay the restoration.

Entering the library, he walks like one in a dream to the upper end of it, where, near the fireplace, Miss Disney is standing with a beating heart and all her soul in her eyes.

But her eyes grow dim and her heart dies within her as she marks the expression of his face, and as he draws even nearer she palpably shrinks from him. To him this shrinking is a fresh proof of her inconstancy. "There is still some grace left in her, some pity for the forlorn wretch she has betrayed," he tells himself grimly, mistaking her nervousness for remorse.

"I have come to you at your own request," he says sternly. "Though I think this appointment—*made by you*—is a mistake. It is useless to talk of even a *friendly* feeling between us again, after all that has come and gone. There is nothing I so keenly desire as a formal separation between us."

Stunned, bewildered, she gazes at him in a speechless astonishment too fresh as yet for grief.

"I have come to set you finally free," he goes on. "I say nothing. I do not accuse you; and it is too late, we *both* know, for hope or expostulation

of any kind. It is impossible to misunderstand *that*, at least. I have now to return you *this*,"—laying the innocent instrument of their undoing upon the table near her,—“and *this*.” By its side he lays a faded bit of nature’s handiwork that a week ago was the marguerite’s gay sister, plucked among the moonbeams and given him by the girl standing before him, pale and mute, and, in his eyes, most false.

A terrible sense of utter desolation falls upon him as he turns away undelayed by any word from her. Even at the door, though inwardly cursing his own weakness for so doing, he pauses, as though in a wild hope that she yet may call to him to come back to her; but no sound breaks upon the heavy stillness that seems to have fallen on the room, and, opening the door, he goes out quickly, closing it firmly behind him.

The click of the lock rouses Miss Disney from the spell that has taken her into full possession. With a little gasping cry, she sinks into a chair and covers her face with her hands. What does it all mean? What has happened?

Slowly—slowly—the thought dawns upon her that he has *rejected* her,—has spurned her overture and treated her poor attempt at reconciliation with ignominy. He had not *wanted* to be reconciled. He was perhaps *glad* of the chance of escape she had first afforded him by her senseless encouragement of that *hateful* Sir George (alas! how the great

are fallen!); and she had tried to force herself upon him, and he had come himself to tell her he would none of her. Oh!——

She starts to her feet and clasps her hands together to prevent herself from bursting into tears of cruel mortification. She walks rapidly up and down the room, planning deep thoughts of vengeance, but no help, no comfort comes to her. For a long half-hour she so ponders in fruitless search after a calm that will not come, and at the end of it her courage forsakes her. She confesses to herself that she is unhappy, miserable, that all men are detestable, and that above and beyond all his fellows Mr. Ponsonby is *the* most detestable, and that she hates him, and she doesn't care; and then she flings herself into a huge arm-chair, and, letting her face drop upon her lovely naked arms, breaks into bitter weeping.

Mr. Wilding, entering the room a few moments later, finds her in this condition. She tries, indeed, to rise suddenly, and turns her face from him; but to conceal the fact that she is in great distress is impossible.

"Never mind me," says Mr. Wilding, going up to his poor little cousin and patting her shoulder tenderly. "I'm sorry it has come to this; because he's an uncommon good fellow. He has just told me all about it."

"He is a wretch!" says Miss Disney, with startling fervour.

"You ought to be the last to be down upon



him," says her cousin, reprovingly. "Even supposing he *did* give you a piece of his mind, I think you should be the one to make allowances for a slight display of temper. No fellow likes being done in that sort of way."

"*Done?*"

"My dear child, what's the good of keeping it up before me? I *know* all about it, from start to finish."

"Oh, you *do!*" says Miss Disney, in a tone of bewildered resignation.

"Yes; and, though I am not, as a rule, one of the obnoxious '*I-told-you-so*' sort of people, still I foresaw that when you *did* do it you would be sorry for it."

"Ah, you saw that?" says Miss Disney, in a tone of even greater bewilderment and resignation.

"*Certainly* I did."

"Yes? And what was it you saw, dear?" asks she meekly.

"Oh, I say, you know," says Mr. Wilding, in high disgust,—“that is no way to treat a fellow who is almost your brother, you know. If I *must* be plain, I think it is excessively foolish of you to throw up Frank Ponsonby for the sake of an empty title.”

"Is *that* what he told you?" exclaims she, flushing with indignation. "Now, hear the truth from me. It's—it's a *horrible* thing to have to confess; but I'll trust *you*. I tried to make friends with him, and I sent him a flower, and he wouldn't *have* it; and he came here and told me he wished to *set* me

'*finally free*' (*such* a way of putting it!); and"—her cousin's arm is round her by this time, and she is sobbing her heart out on his shoulder—"I am the most unhappy girl in all the world!"

"Bless me! there must be a mistake somewhere," says Mr. Wilding at his wits' end.

"You won't betray me, will you?" sobs his pretty but deeply-afflicted cousin.

"Nonsense! Of course not. But tell me about that unfortunate flower."

She tells him.

"Show it to me," says Mr. Wilding, at the close of her confession, assuming the barrister air that gains him daily commendation from the bench. Together, and with the utmost caution, they count the petals again, and at the end look blankly into each other's face.

"How *could* it have happened?" says Miss Disney, in an awe-stricken tone.

"One petal is missing," says Mr. Wilding, still before the bar. "One of two things must have occurred,—either *you* counted wrongly the first time, or else it was removed by——"

At this moment Katherine Nugent enters the room.

"Oh, Katherine!" cries Alys, and, running to her, throws her unsuspecting arms round her and tells her all. "My cousin, Mr. Wilding, tells me he, Frank, is suffering as much from this wretched mistake as I am. You gave it to him yourself,—with your own hands?"

"Yes," says Katherine, calmly.

Wilding, who is watching her closely, tells himself she does excellently well indeed. "It is a very unfortunate affair," he says, still with his eyes on Miss Nugent.

"Very." Her eyes meet his calmly, unwaveringly.

"Something ought to be done about it at once."

"I quite agree with you. But who is to do it? and what is to be done?"

"I know," says Alys, very quietly, and with a strange amount of determination for her. "I shall explain all to him myself—*to-night*."

"*You!*" says Miss Nugent, an unpleasant amount of astonishment in her tone.

"Yes. Why not? I think it only due to him," says Mr. Wilding, slowly. "*You* see an objection to this course?"—turning to Katherine.

"I? Oh, *no!* Why *should* I? It is really nothing to me. I have no *right* to an objection. Besides, there *isn't* one. Frank Ponsonby"—here she compels the girl's eyes to meet hers by the very intensity of her own regard—"is of too generous a nature to see any *indelicacy* in this act of hers."

"Indelicacy!" repeats Alys, growing very pale. "If I speak to him on this subject, can I be accused of *that*?"—turning piteously to her cousin.

"Being a man," says Mr. Wilding, slowly, "I can tell you all the more surely what *his* answer would be to that question. It would be '*No.*'"

"There, dear; Mr. Wilding knows," says Miss Nugent, with a faint smile.

"But, oh, if he should be *wrong!*" says the girl, in an agony of doubt. "Perhaps if some one else were to tell him it would be better; but who?"

"Shall I?" says Katherine, softly.

Wilding, still with his eyes on Katherine, makes no movement.

Katherine, stooping forward, lays her hand on the girl's arm.

There is a long pause. And then the girl, lifting Miss Nugent's hand, holds it for an instant in mid-air, and then gently drops it. Some divine instinct at the same moment makes her fall back, as though to ward the other off. "No, *no*. I will tell him myself," she says, with nervous haste and a profound sigh. She walks away from them, and, reaching the door, is soon beyond recall.

"A very impulsive girl," says Miss Nugent, turning to Wilding.

"A very good girl when under no evil influence," returns he, coolly.

"Sir George's, you mean?"

"No."

"Frank's?"

"Certainly not."

"Whose then?" asks Miss Nugent, with the softest smile.

"To be discourteous is to lose a point," says

Wilding, unmoved. "But,"—confidentially,—“if I were *you*, I should—*chuck it up*.”

“Slang has always been a buried language to me,” says Miss Nugent, politely. “You mean——?”

“So very little already unknown to you that it is hardly worth while my explaining it,” says Wilding, genially. “Still, I would repeat my former words, because——” He pauses. Miss Nugent looking to him for a continuation of the sentence, he says mildly, “Because you haven’t the ghost of a chance.”

#### CHAPTER V.

“By some degree of woe  
We every bliss must gain.”

FINDING herself once more in the silent hall, Miss Disney stops short and sighs again. Then a great longing for fresh air overcomes her, and, passing quickly through the now deserted dining-room, she steps on to the balcony outside, and presently finds herself in the garden.

A silvery light hangs over it. The moon, that “goddess excellently bright,” is hanging amid trembling fleecy clouds, like a great lamp lent by the heavens to shed a glow upon the despondent earth.

Again its rays pierce the gloom of the eastern corner of the gardens and shed a mellow lustre upon the forced modesty of Apollo—ivy-clad—and upon the dazzling bunch of marguerites, nodding and drooping in their sleep.

Only a week ago she had stood just here with

her *true* love,—happy, yet hardly aware of the depth of her happiness; and now with what a different gaze she looks upon the world! Knowledge has come to her *too late*. Only with the *loss* of it has come the full appreciation of the thing she has lost.

Something in the scene before her brings prominently forward a doubt that ever since her last interview with Ponsonby has been weighing heavily upon her. Now, as it asserts itself fully, it sends a little chill to her heart.

In spite of all her cousin has said, may not her late reckless encouragement of Sir George have killed the love once felt for her by Ponsonby? This terrible thought grows stronger the more she dwells upon it, and at length grows into such tremendous proportions that her heart dies within her.

If she now seeks a second explanation with— with Mr. Ponsonby, will he not be justified in thinking she is seeking to throw herself upon his mercy, and that she is desirous of renewing old associations with him at any cost?

She grows crimson as this thought comes to her, and tears of mortification rise to her eyes. No! she can never speak to him on this subject—*never*! She *will* not! She puts up her hands to her face, as though to hide her shamed eyes even from the tender moonlight, and in so doing hastily decides that she now for ever abandons all idea of seeking an interview with Ponsonby.

She will not speak to him; she will not *see* him

again, if possible! Deriving some mysterious comfort from this resolution, and feeling therefore somewhat better, she takes down her hands from her eyes, and in so doing finds herself face to face with Ponsonby.

She turns as white as death; but with the necessity for speaking comes a rush of womanly dignity that reduces her to instant calm and adds tenfold to her girlish grace and sweetness.

"Let me speak to you for one moment," she says, impulsively, with a slight motion toward him. His sudden presence has convinced her that her late cowardly resolution had in it no element of *right*, and that an explanation is due not more to her than to him.

"Certainly," he says, very gently. All the sternness is gone from his tone, a settled melancholy having taken its place. Encouraged, though weakened, by this change in him, she goes on hurriedly.

"There is something I *must* tell you," she says, tremulously. "But first"—throwing up her head with a little proud gesture that becomes her infinitely—"I would have you understand that what I have to say cannot in *any* way alter the relations now existing between us. We are separated *for ever*. No one, I am glad to think at this moment, can know that better than you."

"No one," corroborates Mr. Ponsonby, in a tone that has acquired even a deeper dye, so far as misery is concerned.

"I am glad of that," says the girl, readily. Yet an intelligent observer might have failed to see where the gladness lay: certainly not in voice, or lips, or eyes. Mr. Ponsonby, I regret to say, proves himself on this occasion (only) wanting in intelligence, as he openly accepts her statement at her own value, and grows in dejection thereby. "I am *very* glad of it," repeats Alys unsteadily and with now averted eyes and a paltry assumption of content, "because I can now safely tell you, without fear of misconception on your part, that it was all a mistake about that marguerite I sent you an hour ago. At *that* time" (by her manner it might reasonably be supposed again by the intelligent listener that the time mentioned is a year ago) "I was troubled, and—and ashamed of myself (I am neither now), and anxious to let you know that—that I had not changed toward you in any way, in spite of anything foolish in me that might have induced you to think otherwise."

There is something in this rebellious speech so sadly regretful, and so very near to tears, that instinctively Mr. Ponsonby goes a step closer to her, and puts out his hand as though to take hers; but she waves him back imperatively.

"When I sent you that flower," she goes on, her voice taking a still prouder ring as she feels the humiliation of her confession, and with her soft eyes suffused with tears of childish grief and agitation, "I thought,—I *firmly believed*,—it was convey-



ing to you the message 'I love you!' I counted the petals carefully; I made sure not one was missing; but I suppose I counted badly. I tell you this now, for no motive but the natural wish that you should not believe me altogether heartless. You understand me? You *must* know"—passionately—"that for this reason alone I have spoken to you to-night."

"I *do* know," says the young man, earnestly. Again he goes nearer to her. There is suppressed hope and growing excitement in his face and manner.

"Not that it matters now," says Miss Disney, her voice trembling more and more. "Nothing matters any more at all! We have both learned to be indifferent to each other, and—and—I hope I shall never, *never*, NEVER see you again after to-night!"

Here the voice passes beyond all trembling, having broken down and given place to bitter weeping.

She has lifted her hands to cover her face, and so stands before him, a little, slender, grief-laden figure, on which the gentle moon is shining, lighting up the pretty rounded arms and the gold-brown tresses of the bowed head. But for not half so long as it takes to write this does she so stand. In a moment she is in his arms, and is sobbing out the remainder of her grief upon his breast.

He has drawn her close to him, and closer still, until their hearts beat almost in unison.

"My darling," he says with passionate fondness, "my dear, dear love, do not cry like that. I think, —I *try* is thought it until to-night,—but now I *do*

think that you love me. Alys, tell me I am not deceiving myself."

She can find no words, but, still with her face hidden upon his breast, lifts her arms and slips then lovingly round his neck. It is an answer all-sufficient.

Never before has she so abandoned herself to him, and for the first time the gladness of possession enters into his soul.

"You are mine now," he says, tightening his clasp round her, "now, and for ever! Let us go back a week in our lives, and forget that these last miserable seven days have ever been. You—you don't *care* for that fellow Grande?"

"There is only one person on earth I care for, and that is *you!*" says the girl, clinging to him.

"And yet——"

"Yes, yes; I know all that. I should not have believed her, but she told me you thought me a baby,—a mere silly child,—who could have no lover but you."

"*Who* told you all this?" demands he, with darkening brows.

"Katherine, your cousin. But"—dissolving into tears again—"it wasn't *true*, Frank, was it?"

"It was not, indeed," says Mr. Ponsonby, grimly. "These last few days have proved it. I cannot help feeling that I am depriving you of a title."

"You *said* you would forget this past horrid week," says Miss Disney, reproachfully, "and now you are scolding me about it."

"Well, it shall be my last scolding," says Ponsonby. "And as for the other things, you say I thought of you as a child. I tell you now, with your heart against mine, that I thought of you only as the woman I loved beyond all this earth contains."

"I know it now; I was mad to doubt you," says Alys, remorsefully; "but she *said* it; and, knowing you are superior to me in every way, I felt it easy to believe her."

"And it was she, too, who brought me the marguerite," says Ponsonby, musingly, in a low tone. A sudden thought occurring to him, he tightens his grasp on her arm. Then he recovers himself.

"Why think of *anything*?" he says, placing his lips to hers. "Let us only remember that we belong to each other by the divine right of love. All else may readily be forgotten."

"No," says the girl, leaning back in his embrace so as to look into his eyes. "I shall never forget this, our first and last quarrel. I don't *want* to! I am *glad* of it!"

"*Glad*, my soul?"—regretfully.

"Yes,"—triumphantly,—"*very* glad. Because," a smile fighting with the tears that still linger on her lashes, "but for *it* I should never have known how entirely *you* love *me*, and *I* *you*."

"My beloved!" murmurs he, with ineffable fondness.

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## NURSE EVA.



## NURSE EVA.

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A WARM bright day in golden June; a crowded park; a rushing of dainty wind soft and pure, such as one seldom feels in this smoky London of ours; and over all a brilliant sun, grown drowsy now, as it seeks its rest, and sinks languorously into the fond arms of evening.

The stream of carriages is growing thinner; the Princess has disappeared. One young man, riding a handsome chestnut in a somewhat careless fashion, as though his thoughts were elsewhere, quits the Row, and turns towards the ugliest thing in creation. Having reached the Albert Memorial, he passes through the gate a little further on, and finds himself presently in the midst of a hopeless jangle, composed of cabs, hansoms, drags, and so forth.

Something in the jangle disagrees with the chestnut's temper. She starts, throws up her sleek head into the very midst of her master's day-dreams, makes a false step, and comes heavily to the ground, flinging her rider, with a horrible crash, right under the wheels of a passing carriage.

It is all done in a moment. There is a cry from the bystanders, a vain attempt to make a clear space, and then a senseless form, soiled and disfigured with dust and blood, is raised by half a dozen rough, if kindly, hands, and conveyed to the nearest hospital. They pull the bell, and the door being opened, they enter with their ghastly burden, and lay it down within the hall: it is all that remains of the careless gay young man, so full of happy life, who had left the Park only a short time ago.

The house-surgeon, passing through the hall at this moment, casts a sharp glance at the unsightly object on the bench.

"What is this?" asks he; and, coming nearer, bends over it. His face changes. "Good heavens! It is Sir Rawdon Dare!" he exclaims, in a horrified tone. "Send the matron here at once—See what has happened," he says presently, as a tall handsome woman comes hurriedly up to him. His tone, though low, is agitated.

"An accident," says she, stooping, in turn, over the prostrate Baronet.

"And a very serious one. It is Sir Rawdon Dare. Is there a special ward?"

"One empty."

There is a touch of curiosity in her glance as she examines the death-like features beneath her.

"Let him be taken there. It is impossible he

can be conveyed to his own house in his present state."

"It is a chance whether he will ever be conveyed there—alive," says the matron, turning away to give her orders.

"There is another thing," says the surgeon, detaining her. "He must have a careful nurse. You can recommend one from the wards?"

"Certainly," says the matron, pausing as if to consider. There is a good deal of kindly interest in her compassionate, if somewhat austere, face, as she gazes at the poor crushed figure; just as kindly, however, would she have looked at him had he been the veriest beggar that crawls our streets. "There is Nurse Eva," she says hastily; "she can undertake the case. She is both careful and sympathetic."

And now the wounded man, mercifully oblivious to his pain, is carried by experienced tender hands to a small private ward, and laid upon a bed. The doctors cluster round him. A young woman in hospital cap and apron comes quietly into the room, and stands beside the bed. She glances earnestly at her patient.

Surely that poor blood-bestained creature can have no life in him? There is a long pause; then one of the doctors, who has been stooping over the senseless figure, lifts his head.



"He is not dead—yet," he says. There is little or no hope in his tone.

After a long sleep, as it seemed to him, the sick man woke. He lay silently gazing at the four white walls of the small room in which that strange sleep had taken place, but without wondering why he was there. Thinking, as yet, was too great a task; and so he put it from him. The window was open, and beyond, in the outside distance, there was a waving of green branches, and from still farther on there came to him the subdued roar of unsubdued populace. Inside there was some very curious furniture—or, at least, so he thought it, as his languid glance travelled over it—a huge branch of crimson roses on a small table, a wicker chair, and a girl.

The girl's head was turned from him towards the window. Her body also slightly bent in its direction. It occurred to him that she must be lost in thought. The idle way in which her hands lay upon her lap helped him, too, to this conclusion.

As he watched her, a little sooty sparrow perched upon the window-sill, and looked at her knowingly out of his small eye. She rose, found some bread-crumbs in a funny little cupboard, and returned with them to the window. Of course, when she got there the bird was gone. She seemed in nowise disconcerted by this, but sat down and fell back again into her former thoughtful attitude, and then

presently not one but three little sparrows came and carried away some of her donation. She had not glanced at the bed when getting her crumbs, believing her patient to be dozing; but he, watching her with newly-opened eyes, had seen her face.

It was a revelation! It was beauty perfected! He lay quite still after he had seen it, dwelling with a drowsy pleasure on the remembrance of it until some minutes had gone by, and then a growing desire to see it again took possession of him. He felt still so weak and tired that he shrank from giving his voice sound, so, to attract her attention, he clutched feebly at the bedclothes, and then made a sorry effort to tap upon the quilt.

In a moment she was alert and eager. She came quickly to him, and bent over him.

"Why, this is good news," she said, in a low, exquisitely soft voice, and with a smile. "You are beginning to be yourself again, are you not? No, do not answer; I know what you would say; I understand you quite."

She laid her hand with a soothing touch upon his forehead; she settled his pillows, and then, going to the door, pressed her fingers on a knob in the wall outside. This brought the house-surgeon to her in a few minutes.

"Come," said he cheerily, nodding at the patient, "this is well; you are to be congratulated, nurse. Our patient is getting on, eh?—eh?"

He said "eh?" a good many times in a pondering fashion, and then took the nurse aside and whispered to her in quite a confidential manner. As he did so, it occurred to Sir Rawdon, in quite a feeble inconsequent way not to be accounted for, that he hated the house-surgeon! Nurse, he had called her. With that face—a nurse! Of course she wasn't a lady, poor thing; but with those little white slender hands to be—a nurse! And with that charming figure and that high-bred—"No, no, thanks, old man, nothing more. See you by and by at Lady Stanhope's. Look out, Alys: those bull-terriers are often treacherous—" and so on, again falling into the old delirious state, and babbling ever of this Alys, whose name had been so frequently on his lips all through his illness.

The nurse was at his side again directly.

"You must expect these little relapses for a while," said the surgeon with encouragement, patting her kindly on the shoulder.

Then there came a week when he felt much stronger, and could lie contentedly gazing at his nurse with certain recognition in his eyes, and no fear of its slipping away from him.

"When may I go?" he asked her suddenly one morning, when she was giving him his breakfast. His question was somewhat ungraciously put. He was, indeed, a little querulous at times; but she,

accustomed to the vagaries of sick people, didn't appear to mind it.

"Not for a short while yet," she said. She spoke to him with the intonation one might use to a fractious child, and with a lenient smile. "Are you tired of us already?"

"Not tired of you—no."

"But you want to get back to the other life? Of course it is only natural." Did a faint, faint sigh escape her here? "Your friends want to get you back there too."

"It is hardly that," said he quickly. "It is more—that I want to feel myself—*myself* again. A *man*!—I am sick of coddling, and physic, and so forth."

This, too, was ungracious, and he knew it when the words had passed his lips. He glanced at her furtively, to see if he had offended her; and though he would have been miserable had he succeeded in paining her, he was still angrily disconcerted at finding she had taken no heed whatsoever of his petulance.

"It is a matter of indifference to her whether I am pleasant or the reverse," he said to himself, with a frown.

"I am afraid you must be content with us for a week or two longer," she said, brightly. "But that should not be so great a hardship to you. In your present state, how could you be better off *there* than *here*?"

She was looking frankly into his eyes, and the beauty of her expression killed his small touch of rancour.

"I should be worse off," he said, flushing warmly; "I should be without my nurse."

"No; we supply nurses to private cases. You would probably have had one in your own home as good as I am," returned she, calmly.

"Still, it wouldn't be you," said he. Then, "Do you like the life here?"

"Yes."

There was as much No as Yes in this answer, and it puzzled him.

"It is a hard life," he said.

"Most lives are hard," returned she, sententiously.

This checked him for a time, but the demon of curiosity having made him his prey, he was compelled to go on again.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Nurse Eva."

"I know that. I shall never" — gratefully — "forget that. But your other name, I mean."

It had tormented him inconceivably in his sick moments to think it might be Smith or Jones.

There was a short, but eloquent pause. When it had gone by she turned and looked him fairly in the face.

"I have no other name," she said, icily.

She got up from her seat, and moved towards the window.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure!" exclaimed he, horror-stricken with shame at his mistake. "I assure you I didn't mean it—I——"

"If you excite yourself you will have a relapse, and not be able to leave us even as soon as I have said," interrupted she, with increasing coldness. "Think of the misery of *that*, and compose yourself."

A suspicion of scorn in her manner checked further speech on his part. He turned on his side and feigned slumber. But he could not get her face out of his thoughts. That last little touch of hauteur had become her. Strange to say—for one in her class—it had *suit*ed her, had seemed to belong to her of right! What a brute he was to ask her such a question! Surely she had a right to her own secrets; and yet—yet he wished now her name had been honest Jones or Smith, and that she had been able to say so.

But he had angered her, and could not sleep without her forgiveness. He was still so weak that sleep at all times was essential to him.

"Nurse," he said presently, in a tone that reminded him of the days when he was a schoolboy and in disgrace.

"Well," said she.

"I'm very sorry I said *that*," mumbled Sir

Rawdon from beneath the bedclothes; "it was abominable of me."

He had now evidently come to the point when a good sound caning was reasonably to be expected.

"You want me to say I forgive you," said Nurse Eva, softly, coming up to him again and looking down upon him. "Very good—I say it. Now go to sleep."

"You don't *look* as if you forgave," protested he, anxiously. "If you could only know what I feel about it! You must think me so contemptible—and you so kind to me, and——"

"If that is all, be comforted. I do not think you contemptible," returned she; and even as she spoke a sweet soft smile overspread her lovely face, falling like a healing sunbeam on the repentant invalid. With a sigh of relief he closed his eyes, and sank into a refreshing slumber.

Then came a day when his nurse entered his room with a very jubilant air. Perhaps it was rather too jubilant an air.

"Rise, prisoner," said she; "the hour of your release has arrived."

He answered her with a reproachful glance, but no word.

She laid the little breakfast-tray upon the table near, and began to busy herself with its contents.

"It seems a shame to give you any trouble, now

I am so strong again," he said. "And yet—I like to see you doing that."

"You like to see me getting your breakfast ready. A very sensible fancy."

"You misunderstand me," he said, hastily, and then stopped abruptly. It was difficult to go on with those large clear eyes fixed coldly upon him. And, after all, what was it he wanted to say? Yet the very repellancy of those eyes only made some vague unanalysed feeling within his breast the more unendurable.

"Eva," he said, suddenly, with a vehemence that suggested hidden passion.

She laid her tiny teapot down slowly, without a suspicion of agitation, and turned her eyes fully upon his.

"*Nurse* Eva!" she said, with indescribable dignity.

She then gave him his tea, and arranged the tray as carefully as ever before him. If her hand trembled a little, she took very great care it should not be seen.

As for him, he seemed dissatisfied with all she gave him, and toyed discontentedly with his food, and finally told her, almost rudely, to take it away from him.

"This is foolish," she said, gravely. "You will want strength for your removal. Try to eat something."



"The very thought of my removal takes away my appetite," retorted he, sullenly, rejecting with angry persistence the little dainty trifle she sought to press upon him.

Then the surgeon came in again, and felt his pulse, and asked a question or two, and went through the usual formula.

"All going on as well as we could wish," he said at last. "You have, indeed, made a wonderful recovery, my dear Sir Rawdon. Give you my word, there was a time when—eh?—eh? Well, and so the carriage is to be here for you at twelve? Hah! glad to run away from us, eh?—eh?"

"Is it safe for me to move to-day?" asked Sir Rawdon, languidly. There was no languor, however, in the deep anxiety of his eyes. "I don't think I feel so well as I did yesterday."

"Eh? what? Pouf! nonsense, my dear sir!" said the surgeon, gaily. "Invalid's tremors, nothing more. I tell you, you are getting out of our hands more hopefully every moment. We shall be ashamed to prescribe for you soon."

"Perhaps if my going were to be postponed until——"

"Not at all—nothing of the kind. The very change will do you good," said the surgeon, cheerily. "Come, come now—speak to him, nurse."

"But supposing I should have a relapse—that

would be unpleasant," said this remarkably careful young man.

"Eh? How is this, nurse?" said the surgeon, somewhat perplexed by his patient's pertinacity.

As he appealed to her, Sir Rawdon raised himself slightly on his elbow, and appealed to her too—with his dark eyes. Her glance, passing from the surgeon's face to his, rested there for a moment. There was entreaty, longing, hope, and something far more than all these in his gaze. She turned away from it slowly, but resolutely.

"There will be no fear of a relapse," she said to the surgeon, in cold measured tones, her eyes bent upon the ground. "It is better, *far* better he should go to-day, as arranged."

A swift change altered the expression of Sir Rawdon's face. Whereas before it was almost humbly imploring, it was now proud and stern.

"To-day, then, be it, by all means," he said, in a decided tone. "The sooner the better;" after which he sank back with an angry jerk upon his pillow.

The surgeon laughed a little, and presently went away. The nurse busied herself in tidying the already scrupulously tidy room.

"In what mad haste you are to get rid of me!" said Sir Rawdon at last, finding the silence unbearable. How cold, how calm, how unfeeling she appeared with that beautiful unreadable face of hers!

"You see I have your interests at heart," she said.

"Mine?"

"Yes. Do you forget how you were pining for your freedom only a short two weeks ago? Now it lies before you."

"You are ungenerous," he said. Then more slowly, "A fortnight is a long time. One may learn many things in it."

"True. *You* have learned to get well," said she, quietly.

"More than that!" He flushed a dark red, and held out his hand to her, "I have learned besides to——"

He paused with terrible, unmistakable suddenness. The colour died from his face, and a quick pallor succeeded it. His very lips grew white, because of the severity of his mental struggle. What was it he had been about to do? To tell this nameless girl—this worse than nameless girl, who was ashamed to declare aloud her honest appellation—that he loved her! To ask her to be his wife! He, a Dare, and the head of his house! His hand sank once more to his side, he breathed heavily, and at length, without looking at her, turned his face away from her to the wall. Here a bitter strife took place between his heart and him, but when it was ended his heart remained the victor, and he roused himself, and looked round for her.

♦

Of her, however, he found the room empty. During that short but violent battle with prudence and affection, in which prudence had been slain, she had left him—had vanished, as it were. In her chair sat a probationer, a young woman with pale eyes and a snub nose, and a generally afflicted air. He had seen this probationer before, and had amused himself at odd moments counting the number of aspirates she could drop in half an hour. She spoke with a little snuffle in her throat, and was otherwise in many ways most hateful to him.

Now, the knowledge that Nurse Eva was never absent from him for longer than thirty minutes at a time became an intense consolation to him. She would soon be here, and that odious young woman would vacate her chair, in which it seemed a positive sacrilege that she should be allowed to sit. But the minutes crept on, and the half-hour grew into an hour, and the hour into two, and still the probationer sat on, and Nurse Eva made no sign.

The dragging hours were at first a bore to him, and at length became intolerable. And when the probationer rose, and declared it was time for him to rise, as the carriage would soon be here, and when a nurse from another ward came to assist her, he was almost rude to them both.

But time was inexorable and wore away, and at last the carriage was announced, and two or three of his friends and relations came in to congratulate

him and help him down to it. The house-surgeon was present also, looking really pleased at his recovery. To him Sir Rawdon turned with a somewhat hurried air, and an amount of passionate anxiety he vainly tried to conceal.

"Where is Nurse Eva?" he said, his voice trembling slightly; "I cannot go until I bid her good-bye, and thank her—thank her for——"

He stopped, and cleared his throat huskily.

"I'm afraid you can't see her to-day," said the surgeon, cheerfully. "She has been somewhat overworked of late, you see; so when she asked the matron, a couple of hours ago, to give her a holiday to take a run down to Putney, or somewhere, you may be sure she got no refusal. The matron—indeed we *all* think a good deal of her, and she did seem pale and fatigued, poor girl, when she came down from your room about ten o'clock. I'm glad the day is so fine, both for your sake and hers. She said, by-the-bye, that you were so thoroughly convalescent that you would require her services no longer. She seemed to me in bad spirits—a little overdone, no doubt."

"No doubt," said Dare. He said even this with difficulty. Of course he understood it all! That brutal hesitation of his! What woman but would have taken fire beneath such an insult? His manner in itself was unbearable, presupposing as it did that if he uttered his proposal it would of a surety be

accepted. With what sweet dignity she had behaved! She had uttered no taunt, had looked no scorn. She had only withdrawn herself, and taken measures to insure herself against the annoyance of ever being face to face with him again.

But it should not end here. Of that he was determined. He would at least see her once more, and compel her to believe that when his craven wavering had drawn to a close he knew himself to be hers, body and soul. He got down to the carriage some way, and was driven home.

But he was a good deal knocked up by the exertion of removing, and suffered a slight relapse that kept him to his bed for a week or so. The old familiar scenes were now, too, changed to him, and touched him as being barren and wanting in many ways.

When he rallied a bit, and found himself in possession of a little of his former strength, the first use he made of it was to drive straight to the hospital. He was shown into the matron's room, where he thanked her courteously, if a little absently, for the care conferred upon him whilst under her roof. After that he said casually that he thought he should like to thank his nurse also. It was with a paling cheek he said this, and with eyes downcast.

"Nurse Eva?" said the matron. "O, she left us quite a fortnight ago. We were all so sorry to

lose her, she was such an excellent nurse. I am sure you too, Sir Rawdon"—with a smile—"will have a good word for her on that score."

"Left!" It was all Sir Rawdon could say.

"Yes; almost the day after you did."

"You know her address perhaps?"

When he asked this, he felt like a drowning man grasping at a straw, and he knew the straw would fail him.

"No," said the matron regretfully. She thought him a very kind young man. Gratitude, as a rule, is not an overpowering passion with the many. "But do not fret about that," she said. "I am sure she understood that you would wish to thank her. Yes, she was an excellent nurse—so sympathetic; we were sorry to lose her."

Sir Rawdon rose to bid her good-bye.

"I suppose Dr. Bland would not know her address?" he said.

"No, I am sure of that. She went away very suddenly—for family reasons, as she told me—and left no word with any one as to where she was going. Good-bye, Sir Rawdon; so glad to see you so thoroughly restored," etc.

Sir Rawdon, returning her farewell, told himself he was not so fully restored as she kindly imagined, and that his strength was by no means what it used to be.

It is a year and a half later, and Christmas Eve. There is no suspicion of invalidism about the tall, handsome young man who, sitting in a first-class carriage, with a rather bored expression on his face, is being whirled swiftly northwards. He had checked his journey by spending one day in Edinburgh, and had felt it dull in the extreme. Even now, when he is hastening on to Aberdeen, the stupidity of his lonely stay there has not quite worn off. But he is always dull now, he tells himself, with a disdainful shrug of his broad shoulders, and grows moodier and moodier, until, his journey coming to an end, he finds himself on the chilly platform, with two gleaming carriage lamps awaiting him. The drive is a long one, and bitterly cold. The change from it to the soft brilliant warmth of a huge hall, hung with many skins and bristling with antlers, is almost more than he can endure with fortitude. As in a dream, he follows the servant across the hall—rose-lit from two large shaded lamps upon the dark oak staircase beyond—and valiantly suppresses a desire to stay beside the huge log fire for ever.

But the servant mercilessly marches him onwards, and presently he finds himself in a long, low, many-cornered room full of people, all more or less in the reposeful attitudes that border upon sleep. There is a soft, sweet subdued hum of slumberous voices, a tender tinkling of delicate



china, the music of many spoons. There are no rose-lamps in this room; nothing but the leaping light of a glorious fire that renders all things clear as day. The divan-looking lounges are covered with tartan, so are a good many of the men, and only a few of them have their nether limbs covered.

Sir Rawdon, still unthawed, stares idly round him. There is a pretty girl in a voluminous arm-chair, who nods brightly to him—Miss Adair; and another crouched picturesquely upon the bearskin-rug before the fire, who stops her chatter for an instant to gaze at him curiously; and——

Good heavens! who is that? Who is that sitting over there, with *her* face, *her* figure, the very hands of *her*!

A slender creature, reclining in a low chair, and clad in an exquisite tea-gown—all satin and old lace. She is smiling. One arm, half naked, but mittened to the elbow, is lying gracefully across the arm of her lounge as she leans towards her neighbour; the other is trifling idly with a huge white fan.

Even as Dare gazes at her, spellbound, she laughs, softly, merrily, at some remark made to her by her companion—a red-headed young Scotchman. The laugh somewhat restores Sir Rawdon to his senses. Alas! *she* had never laughed; her lovely face had always been tinged with a deep melancholy. What madness possessed him to make him think he saw again before him the one woman he

had ever loved—the only one he ever should love? And to dream of meeting her here, of all places! A hospital nurse as a guest at The Towers, in that gown, that——

“Dear Sir Rawdon, so glad!” says his hostess—a tall handsome woman—at this moment, coming languidly forward with a smile and a graceful gesture. “So nice to see you again.”

Sir Rawdon murmurs something to the effect that he is positively overpowered with joy at the idea of seeing *her* again; but his words sound vague and unmeaning—to himself, at least—and his eyes are not his own to deal with; they wander incessantly to the low chair and its lovely occupant, and will not be controlled. Who *is* the owner of that tea-gown?

“I think you know everybody,” says Lady Dalruth, at the end of a long sentence, not one word of which he heard.

“Not quite all. I have not the happiness of knowing your pretty friend on the hearth-rug, or—or the lady in the low chair over there.”

“No? Well, time will cure that. The latter is my cousin, Miss Monteith. You would like to be introduced to her? Come then.”

“Evelyn dear, let me introduce to you Sir Rawdon Dare,” she says a moment later.

Miss Monteith, turning slowly, lifts her eyes fully

to Sir Rawdon's, and, after a calm comprehensive glance, makes him the very faintest salutation.

If he had ever seen this girl before, it is certain that she shows no recognition of ever having seen him. There is no surprised start, no faintest blush, no betraying pallor. Her little bow is cold in the extreme, but nevertheless civil. She answers his rather agitated remark with the utmost composure; it is some ordinary thing about the beauty of the scenery round, and hardly requires any acknowledgment save a bare "yes," to which she confines herself. If, indeed, some wild freak of Fate has suddenly changed the Nurse Eva—for whom he has been so persistently searching during all these past interminable months—into this stately repellant girl before him, she is so clad in an impenetrable armour of reserve that he cannot pierce it.

And, after all, *is* it she? Could even Fate play such a trick? Is not all this rather some cruelty of his imagination, born of his long dwelling on one engrossing desire?

Once or twice during the evening he tried to speak to her; but though she always answered him very gently, still her manner was so cold as to check on every occasion further conversation.

Dropping into the background, after a last defeat, he finds himself close to an old beau, a certain Sir Harry Loune, who is well known to everybody and to whom everybody is known.

"Wouldn't look at you, eh?" says this old gentleman, with a chuckle. "Don't take *that* to heart; more than you have got the same tale to tell. She won't look at any one, not even at the best *partis*. Pretty, isn't she? Good form, eh? Thing of the season next year, I shouldn't wonder. Lady Dalruth wanted, right or wrong, to introduce her this year, but she wouldn't hear of it. Seems to shrink from publicity. No wonder, too; beauty has made itself so dooced vulgar of late," says the old gentleman, with a shrug of disgust.

"Yes?" says Dare calmly, but his look is in itself a question.

"She's charmin'—charmin'," goes on Sir Harry, when he has refreshed himself with a pinch of snuff, "and mysterious as she is lovely."

"Mysterious?"

"Rather, my dear boy! Mustn't say a word about it, you understand; but when she was about eighteen, her father, Sir Pagan Monteith, you know—eh—what? Don't *want* to know? Ha, ha! Very good indeed! Well, he wished at that time to force her into a marriage with a most dilapidated person—an earl, notwithstanding—quite old enough to be *his* father. Girl wouldn't hear of this sacrifice at any price, and when pressed to it by angry parent, bolted—no one knows where, unless Lady Dalruth may. For three long years she remained incognita. Odd affair, isn't it? Nobody can explain it."

Dare thinks *he* could. Again the belief that Miss Monteith and his sweet nurse are one is full upon him; but he refrains from making his thoughts known to this old gossip.

"Why can't she say where she was, eh?" says Sir Harry, in a distinctly aggrieved tone; "this deadly silence is very injurious to her, eh?"

"Why should it be injurious to her?" asks Sir Rawdon, fiercely.

He turns upon the old baronet with open wrath in his dark eyes. It is insufferable to hear her name bandied thus from lip to lip. And yet—*Her* name? *Whose* name? If he lets this madness overpower him, what will the end be? What has that haughty beauty over there to do with his gentle nurse? Seeing Sir Harry's look of amazement, he hastens to change his tone.

"She looks too proud to be a subject for calumny," he says confusedly, almost apologetically.

But the old scandal-monger has found him slow, and in nowise a kindred spirit; so he hobbles away from him to where Lady Dalruth is standing. Dare, too wearily disturbed in mind to find amusement in his present surroundings, follows his movements with idle uninterested eyes, but presently is attracted by something he hears him saying to his hostess.

"Left him at the point of death," said Sir Harry unctuously, "as *he* thought; but it was nothing of the kind. Gordon recovered almost immediately.

One of the Gordons of Clayne, you know. Fellow who upset him was a cousin, and thought to come in for the property, d'ye see."

"One of the Gordons of Clayne" is a bosom friend of Sir Rawdon's, so naturally he pricks up his ears.

"What *did* happen to him?" asks Lady Dalruth, looking interested.

"Oh, mere trifle! Nothing vital, at all events. One fellow told me it was a broken clavicle; another a fractured humerus; but I haven't the faintest idea what either means."

"You should ask Evelyn for a translation," says Lady Dalruth, with a merry laugh.

Miss Monteith, who had been listening silently to the conversation, turns her eyes upon her. Is there entreaty or simple indifference in her glance? If entreaty, it comes too late; Lady Dalruth does not even see it.

"Miss Monteith?" asks Sir Harry.

"Yes. Didn't you know she has studied medicine, surgery, and all the rest of it?"

"You terrify me," says Sir Harry, with mock horror.

"That is quite a correct feeling for the occasion. She is really terribly learned. Aren't you, Evelyn?"

She smiles at the girl, as though in pleasant appreciation of a jest that is known to them alone. But Miss Monteith's return smile is forced and very faint.

"Learned? no. But I really *have* some taste for that sort of thing," she says quietly; and then turns away, as if anxious to terminate the conversation. In so doing, her eyes meet Dare's. There is a pause, in which each regards the other with a strange anxiety. Then the blood slowly mounts to Miss Monteith's brow, until all her lovely face is dyed a warm crimson. Her breath comes quickly; she wavers; then, with a last defiant, contemptuous glance, she moves away and sinks into a chair at the opposite end of the room.

But to Dare there is no longer even a chance for doubt. Just so had she looked at him when, in a moment's passion, he had called her "Eva" in the hospital, and she had coldly corrected him; just so, no doubt, her large, scornful eyes had rested upon him during that last fateful hour, when he had half declared his love, and had hesitated—and been lost.

With a terrible sinking of the heart he tells himself that he has sinned past forgiveness in her eyes.

The next morning all the world is clad with snow. The soft, white, fleecy carpet is covering the land far as the eye can see, and is lying heavily on branch and bough. The Christmas bells are chiming merrily. A soft grey mist is trembling between earth and sky. Over all, the merry sun is shining gaily. It is indeed an ideal Christmas morn.

Luncheon has come and gone, and they are all standing before the glowing fire in the billiard-room discussing the costumes to be worn at a fancy-dress ball, to be given in the neighbourhood some time in the ensuing month.

"One gets so tired of the art rags and the past centuries' gowns," says Lady Dalruth, dejectedly. "O, for something new, something *bizarre*, out of the common! I'm sure I don't know what is to be done about Evelyn. She and I are quite worn out trying to imagine a costume that all the world hasn't seen a hundred times before. The anxiety has robbed me of my honest sleep for a fortnight past, I have so set my heart on making her a success. But each of my ideas only seems more crude than the last. Dear Sir Rawdon, *do* suggest something."

An uncontrollable impulse takes hold of Dare. He glances at Miss Monteith, to find she too is looking full at him, that dreamy touch of scorn that had offended him last night now wide awake within her large eyes. It spurs him to his half-determined purpose.

"Why not try the dress of a hospital nurse?" he says to Lady Dalruth, pale but smiling. "I don't recollect having ever seen it at a ball before, and I think the pretty little cap and apron would suit Miss Monteith admirably."

"Sir Rawdon! What *can* you know about hospital



nurses?" says a pretty girl from the opposite side of the hearth-rug, with an amused laugh.

"Didn't you know I was in hospital for many weeks—summer before last—when I smashed myself up?" returns Sir Rawdon, distinctly. "I don't think I shall ever forget the kindness I received there; and at all events I know I shall never, under any circumstances, forget—my nurse."

"Ah, gratitude is a charming virtue!" says the pretty girl, with a second laugh. "Was it *her* cap and apron you were thinking of just now?"

"Yes. They are indelibly imprinted upon my brain." Again he glances at Miss Monteith. If she has grown a little whiter it is at least only perceptible to a lover's eyes.

"Do you know, the costume *sounds* well," she says, quite calmly. "Let us think of it, Mirabel," turning to Lady Dalruth. "It is the one thing you desire—out of the common."

Lady Dalruth's answer is a little confused. Miss Monteith looks full at Sir Rawdon, her eyes dilate, and

"O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful  
In the contempt and anger of her lip!"

With a little passionate movement of the hand, unseen by all but him, she crosses the room with slow graceful step, and disappears through the doorway.

It takes Sir Rawdon but a moment to invent some idle speech, that leaves him, too, free to quit

the apartment without arousing suspicion of the real motive of his departure.

Finding himself in the hall, he comes to a standstill, and asks himself what it is he means to do. He cannot forget that last glance of hers, or the passionate anger contained in it. He feels he would give half his possessions to be able honestly to hate her, but yet knows, by the sheer impossibility of his being able to do this, that he *loves* her.

As he stands irresolute, one of the footmen passes through the hall. Then and there a sudden resolution comes to Sir Rawdon. He will go to her, tell her all—lay bare his heart to her, and, if it must be, hear from her own lips the “No” that will blast his life for ever. *Anything* will be better than this crushing suspense.

“Where is Miss Monteith?” he asks the man as he goes by.

“In the library, sir. Saw her go in there just now.”

Opening the library door he enters the room, and finds himself alone with her.

She is standing at the far window, and, with a little start, acknowledges his entrance. He would have gone to her, but with a certain impulsive eagerness she too moves and meets him half way. That her late anger is still warm within her eyes is known to him at the first glance.

“So—now you know me,” she says defiantly, “are you satisfied? Is your curiosity satiated?”

"I knew you from the first moment. Was I likely to forget?"

"That is the bitterness of it," she says. "Are those three sad years of my life never to be obliterated?"

"From *my* mind, never! The few weeks I claim out of them were the happiest of my life."

"What brings you to me now?" demands she suddenly. "Is there more you would still learn as to the why and the wherefore of my going into hospital as a nurse? I warn you I shall give no explanation."

"I do not desire one," says Dare humbly; "I know all about it. Your father's tyranny; your escape from a marriage with that vile old man; your life in hospital—everything. Do you hate me the more because I know all this?"

"Hate you—no!" There is studied contempt in the curl of her lip. "Hatred is a strong sentiment; what I feel for you is only indifference."

She goes back to her former position in the window, as though to terminate the interview. But he having "cast his all upon the die," makes one more effort for dear life. He follows her there.

"Even the worst criminals get a fair hearing," he says. "Let me plead my cause."

"No. It would be waste of time."

"At least tell me of what I stand accused."

"Listen, then!" exclaims she, turning to him

with flashing eyes. "When unkind Fate sent you to that hospital a year and a half ago, and you saw me there day after day, a mere nurse, and—as you believed—unknown and obscure, you deigned to fancy yourself in love with me. Your momentary infatuation went even so far, that as the hour approached that was to put an end for ever to our intercourse with each other, driven by some puerile impulse, you deemed it even possible to declare your love, and offer me your name. But when it came to the point, you *quailed*; you drew back your half-uttered words; you shrank from allying yourself with one beneath you. *My* feelings were as nothing to you. Knowing myself scorned, rejected, without being afforded so much as the poor gratification of being able to refuse you, I left the room, hoping, *praying* I might never see your face again. Do you think," with a painful sob, "I shall ever forgive all that?"

"Hear me."

"I will not. If your life, and heart, and title were all at my feet now, I——"

"They are at your feet."

"Then I reject them," returns she with vehemence.

"As you will. But at least you shall listen to what I have to say in my defence," says Dare with dignity. "That morning of which you speak—my last in the hospital—I truly meant, as you say, to tell you of my love."

"*Meant!* And then—you hesitated."

"I did," says Dare simply. "My name and the honour of my house is dear to me. Is it a crime beyond forgiveness that I should have paused before offering that name and honour to a woman who, though the most beautiful and lovable in the world, was still—unknown?"

"Why should you seek to excuse yourself?" interrupts Miss Monteith haughtily; "I know all that."

"There is, however, one thing that you do *not* know. You saw that I did battle with myself that morning, but you did not wait the termination of it. Love and duty fought a hard fight, but when it was over, you—that is Love—had won the victory; I raised my head again to tell you all—to *beseech* you to be my wife, but you were gone. Later on I searched for you everywhere; I advertised, all to no purpose. For eighteen months I sought for you—in vain."

Her face is turned away from him now, but a faint sound, that is either a sigh or a protest, escapes her.

"About all this you must believe me or not, as you will," says Dare quietly. "I have only my simple word to give you, but it is at least a word that has never yet been dishonoured. Will you not say *something* to me?"

"All I have to say has been said long ago. I

cannot forgive you," says Miss Monteith, but as she says it she bursts into tears.

"I will not accept such words from your lips," exclaims Dare, with deep agitation. And then all in a moment his arms are round her and his cheek pressed to hers.

"Beloved," he says, "have pity upon me! Just think of it! You who have a name as old as mine, can you not understand the struggle I endured?"

"I can," murmurs she sadly; "and—yes, I honour you for it. But——" Here her voice fails. "O, if you could only know what I suffered!" she says, sobbing bitterly.

"I do know it. It was just *half* what I suffered," returns he, gravely. "O darling, put an end to my misery *now—here!* Of the two I am the more to be pitied, because if you still prove unkind my unhappiness will last for ever. Eva, speak to me."

"Evelyn," corrects she, softly.

"Ah, of course. But you must remember how long you have been 'Eva' to me. What an eternity lies in that year and a half! The very length of my wretchedness should buy my pardon."

"You are a special pleader," whispers she; and then she makes him a present of a little arch smile, and a tender glance from under her drenched lashes.

"Tell me you love me," persists he.

"I cannot—yet. There is first something——"

"Nothing that shall separate us," declares he stoutly.

"There may be. Who—who was that 'Alys' you were always raving about during that dreadful time when you were ill?"

"Alys! My sister, of course!" says he triumphantly. "Had a letter from her only yesterday. She has been in India with her husband for the past four years, or probably you would have seen her at the hospital during that lucky time when I was ill. Now, what have you got to say?" He is fast waxing into the wildest spirits.

"Nothing," returns she demurely; "so now let us go back to the others."

She makes a movement as though to go to the door, but he seizes her.

"O, yes, there is something!" he says, "and you sha'n't go without confessing it. Now then—you will marry me?"

"Yes."

"Soon?"

"Ye—es."

"And you are sure you love me?"

"As sure as sure can be!" says Miss Monteith solemnly, with a shameless disregard of maidenly reserve.

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ONE NEW YEAR'S EVE.



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## ONE NEW YEAR'S EVE.

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TO MISS KATHLEEN BLAKE, *Derrygra, Galway.*

“Tomakin, Edinburgh, Dec. 22nd, 1883.

“MY DEAR KATHLEEN,—Here I am at last, after *such* a journey! If I had only known about it, I should have stayed at home, so that now I am rather glad I didn't know. That means that I am pretty comfortable, and quite charmed with all my surroundings. We are *of* Auld Reekie though scarcely *in* it, being perched upon the outskirts of it in a quite too charming house. When I jumped out of the carriage the night of my arrival, and stood in the small outer hall waiting for the bell to be answered, and peered curiously through the glass doors into the larger hall beyond, where a goodly fire was burning, I felt as if my lonely journey had not been for nothing after all. There were two large shaded lamps, that cast a rose-coloured flame upon the polished floor—the big fire I have already mentioned—and somewhat further back a dark oak staircase that faded off into gloom.

“Then a man threw open the door, and in another moment I found myself wrapped in the glow

of the crimson lamps, and following my conductor obediently across the hall and down a passage, and round a corner, and into a recess, and goodness knows where, until we came to a—compartment shall I call it? At any rate it was an antique in the way of ante-rooms, and a door in some obscure corner of it being thrown wide, I was ushered ceremoniously into a brilliantly lighted room beyond.

"I never saw so many corners in any room before in all my life; and it was full of men, and a few women, and several dogs, all more or less in reposeful attitudes. There were no pink lamps in this room, and though it was singularly bright, I think it was only the enormous pine logs on the open hearth that lit it. Lady Janet rose to welcome me, and was as gracious in her reception of me as Nature permitted.

"I felt a wee bit shy at first, and hardly knew what to say. But they were all very good to me, and the women said some pretty things about our picturesque, if somewhat unpleasant land. One of them gently pushed me into a luxurious chair, and, unrequested, deprived me of my sealskin. Another administered to me my tea. It was sweet and strong, and such as my soul loveth. Oh! Katty; the very smell of it made me long for you and our little cosy chats at home. Surely no sister ever loved another as I love you! I said 'Yes,' and 'No,' to all their pretty speeches, as eloquently as I

knew how, but I was, on the whole, silent, and spent my time trying to learn by heart all the different warlike weapons that adorned the walls of this strange room. I wondered how many arsenals in how many countries had been robbed to decorate them and the ceiling of it. There were rifles, dirks, broadswords, pistols, Indian daggers, boomerangs, clubs, spears, assegais, *everything* except (I regret to say it!) the simple and gentle shillelagh.

"Lady Janet has really been quite extraordinarily kind to me, and has given me to understand that she hopes I will forget that she was only my father's step-sister, and try to think of her as his very real own one. I have promised to do all that in me lies in this direction.

"And now, Katty, a last word. Don't let George come to Edinburgh. What's the good of it? I like him; but liking isn't loving, and I don't think I *want* him to love me. I've known him such a time, and when one has almost grown up with a person it makes all the difference. And the fact of his being a baronet doesn't count a scrap! And he is always looking at me so exactly as if he felt certain I should have him after all that he aggravates me. I want you to understand that I esteem George and all his solid qualities quite as much as you and mamma do—only that he worries me.

"Now, there is a man here who doesn't worry me. He calls himself my cousin, because he is a

nephew of Lady Janet's; but really he isn't our cousin in any way. He is tall, handsome, distinguished. One likes him at a first glance. He is a little light and frivolous, perhaps, but very enjoyable; and—he fancies *me!* a *great* charm! After all, most women's likes and dislikes are bound and governed by the fact that somebody else likes or dislikes *them*.

“Let that be as it may, however, I confess I find a modest amount of pleasure in Darnley Bruce's conversational efforts, and in his near vicinity. I wish I had you in the next room, Katty, that I might go in and bore you a bit with my fancies; but as it is, I can only do it on paper—a more merciful way, as you can escape it if you will, with the fire so close at hand.

“Good-bye, my darling sister; and be *sure* you dissuade George from paying that visit here to Lady Janet he has so often threatened since I mentioned my determination to accept her last invitation. A kiss to the dearest of mothers.—Ever your  
OWN,  
“NORAH.”

*To MISS BLAKE, Tomakin, Edinburgh.*

“Derrygra, Galway, Dec. 26, 1883.

“DARLING NORAH,—Look out for squalls! Because he has *started!* The mother having read your letter to me, let out the whole affair without meaning it. She told him how you were enjoying

yourself, and what delightful people Lady Janet had gathered round her, and that there was one man in particular whom Norah seemed to have found especially interesting. You know what mamma is when she once begins! He had a flowing account, I can tell you. I gave her a somewhat severe kick (we were at luncheon), which she bore like a martyr at the time, but for which I had a lecture afterwards. George was up in arms in a moment. I could see that by the glitter of his eye, and the increased suavity of his manner. I write this thus hurriedly, to give you timely warning of his advance upon you. I was quite mad with poor mamma about her want of discrimination in mentioning to him your modern Darnley, and she, when I explained matters to her, professed to be equally mad with herself. But, to be candid, I didn't believe her. I know that in her soul she favours George, and would gladly see you Lady Blake. And I cannot wonder. George, to my thinking, suits you down to the ground; and I don't believe one bit in your hero with the romantic name.

"Dear Norah, don't stay *too* long with that pompous old woman and her nephew, or I shall do something desperate.—Ever your loving sister,

"KATHLEEN."

Christmas had come and gone, and a New Year was at hand. To Norah Blake the past three weeks

spent in her aunt's Scottish home had proved far from unpleasant, though it had been with a doubting heart she had accepted the invitation. There had been moments, indeed, which were altogether pleasant—moments with which Mr. Bruce had had a good deal to do. He had fallen into her life at once, from that first hour when he saw her enter the firelit room, tall and pale, and faintly smiling, and had found himself a little later on rather wrapt up in the arranging of her movements, and almost of her thoughts. He had begun by declaring he would make her visit a pleasant one to her, and had ended by finding that it would be a pleasant one for him.

She was fresh, delightful, even a little amusing; one forgot to yawn when with her, one forgot a good deal, indeed, that one might better have remembered, perhaps, were the truth told. But to be able to forget successfully at times is a very comfortable gift.

The first few days had gone charmingly, and others might have followed as smoothly but for a new element that was thrown into their midst, in the person of the stalwart, solemn young Irishman, Sir George Blake. To Norah, even though his coming had been foretold to her by a faithful sister, his sudden descent upon all the surrounding frivolity had been something of a shock. At times in her quiet home in Ireland she had found him now and

then a trifle oppressive; here he was immeasurably more so. He was, yet he was not, her lover. He had, indeed, gone as far in that direction as she would permit, and had certainly conveyed to her the impression that he fully intended to go farther. He had not in actual words asked her to marry him, but there was not a shadow of doubt that he meant to do so on any occasion that might happen to strike him as being favourable to the possibility of his receiving to his question the answer he desired.

He was calm, methodical, by no means an ideal lover, but he was very good looking, and there was a standing solidity about him that carried its own weight and compelled her at times to think more of him than suited her.

As for Darnley Bruce, he was altogether different. He was as light as the other was solid, and knew more of the world's ways in his thirty years, than Sir George would have discovered in a lifetime. He was a tall, dark man, with an appealing, half-subdued manner that hinted at love making, but that seldom overstepped the limit or made *himself* uncomfortable. He was, Norah told herself, everything he ought to be, and she gave herself up unconditionally to the enjoyment of his perfections, and the arrangements he made for her *bien-être*.

Christmas had been an effective time, and Norah, in a new gown that had shown off all her many



points, had been conscious of an universal admiration, strange as it was exhilarating. Mr. Bruce had looked at her in a very appreciative fashion, and even Sir George's quiet glances that always seemed to her half full of disapprobation, had not had power to damp her inward satisfaction or her open delight at the fitness of things generally.

And now it was the eve of a New Year! Tomorrow would see it dawn! They were all a little depressed in spite of many efforts to the contrary, and Lady Janet was undisguisedly sleepy. Sir George, the only guest that night, tired, perhaps, of listening to Norah's soft laughter as she sat apart with Bruce, had taken an early departure, almost immediately, indeed, after dinner; and at nine precisely Lady Janet rose from her couch and declared her intention of seeking her maid forthwith and the virtuous couch that was to follow on that damsel's administrations. Norah, a little dismayed at the idea of having so early to seek a repose in which she was of no need, rose too.

"You need not come quite yet. You may stay a little longer, dear, and entertain Darnley," said Lady Janet, with drowsy good-nature. "But don't sit up *too* late. See to that, Darnley." She smiled at them in a listless fashion, and then faded sleepily away.

Norah glanced ruefully at her companion. "That means half-an-hour's grace, no more," she said,

"and I do so hate going to bed until the spirit moves me. The way Aunt Janet speaks makes one feel as if one was a baby!"

She laughed, but there was unmistakable vexation in her mirth.

"Well, don't do it," said Darnley. Then he looked at her suddenly as though some thought had just occurred to him. "It is New Year's Eve," he said, "and the city will be illuminated, and there will be rejoicings of a rather unique character in certain parts of it. You, who live so far from us and our customs, should know something of our lower classes. Lady Janet is in bed and the world lies before us. Let us play truant for once. Put on your ulster and the hat that you least esteem, and let us sally forth in search of knowledge."

"I don't think," said Norah, hesitating, "that I much care for knowledge. There should be something else."

"There will be adventure. Cannot even *that* stir you? There will be the certainty that if discovered, condemnation will fall upon our heads. There is the thought that the estimable Sir George (who plainly regards you with open disapproval) would look with scorn upon our conduct. And——"

"Yes—let us go," interrupted she, lightly, flushing and lifting to his, eyes that burned with a quick yet sombre fire.

A few minutes later she stole down, wrapped in

a warm fur cloak and gently hooded, and together they stepped across the hall with its pink shaded lamps, opened the hall door for themselves, and, unknown to the household, emerged into the dullness of the night.

Her letter to her sister, a few days later on, described rather accurately what she saw and felt that night, and the strangeness of the circumstances that were to have such an effect upon her after life.

"I was told that up in the old town at the market cross, under the shadow of the Iron Church, all the poorer people assembled to 'proclaim' the New Year. Of course few of the eminently respectable class, of which we form two units, had ever witnessed their rites or ever meant to! The way was all uphill, as slippery as glass, and thronged with people, who were making noise enough to break the drum of one's ear. I was glad I had on my warm cloak, as it was colder far than anything except ice-pudding.

"The mist was below us, and looked much as the moon might look to those who had got above it, being all luminous with a pure white brilliancy that came from the electric lamps of the railway station hidden somewhere in the depths. Above us was the black outline of the old town and the Castle rock. Everything reasonable seemed all at

once *miles* away, and I was beginning to have a strong fit of repentance, and a mean hankering for my bed-room fire, when—I was rewarded for all my temerity. Oh! Katty, I *wish* you had been with me. I hardly feel sorry for *anything* when I recall it! There was the pitch darkness of the night, the surging, trampling crowd somewhere near, the gaunt houses creeping away up into the ghost-like mist like so many giant cliffs; and all, and everything lighted up in true demoniac style by the red and green and orange fires that flamed up at the corners of all the streets. The effect was indescribably weird, and to add to it one could see vaguely, through the smoke of the fires and the cloudy mist, the great tower of the church with its clock lights.

“And then suddenly there was a great silence—a silence that seemed to me louder than all the tumult that went before it. I thought I heard the beating of all the hearts around me. The fires grew on the instant brighter and brighter; they sprang up as if to reach the sky; their lurid tongues pierced and flamed through the murky darkness, and then, all at once, some clock tolled the hour. What hour I did not then know; but as the last sound of it died on the air, there arose from the multitude a shout, such as I, at least, never heard before! It rang and echoed through the night, and then it ceased, and the fires died down mys-

teriously, and the smoke and the mist met each other and swept over everything, and even the yellow lights in the church tower grew dim. It was all very eerie, but exciting, more than I can say."

So far, Norah's letter could explain matters; but no farther. The mist, indeed, came down upon her and Bruce, and the thought of home ran at last very high within their breasts. When the final toll of the bell had sounded on their ears, they turned, as if with one mind, and sought to escape the turmoil around them. They ran, indeed, a little, and at last paused breathless in a small side street that struck Norah as being remarkably solitary for even that time of night. But in truth she had been so entertained that she felt as if only a few minutes had elapsed since she left Lady Janet's drawing-room.

It was a quaint old-fashioned street in which they found themselves, and it might have been a city of the dead, so still it was, so replete with an unbroken calm. Norah, pausing, glanced at her companion, and then burst out laughing. It was the gayest laugh imaginable, and the lightest-hearted, but it echoed with such a cruel clearness through the deserted street that it at once sobered her.

"Why, where are we?" she said, glancing somewhat timidly to the right and left. "Who could

imagine we had only just emerged from that noisy thoroughfare. Why, it might be miles away now, so—so *singular* is this quiet that has enveloped us. Where are all the people to whom this street means home? Have they, too, joined the madding crowd beyond?"

"More probably they have gone to bed," said Bruce, laughing.

"To bed!" She started violently. "At *this* hour!"

"Why, what hour do you think it is?" asked he, a little surprised at *her* surprise.

"Ten, perhaps?" faltered she, nervously.

"*Ten?* What do you think the shouting was about just now? Have you forgotten that it is the New Year's Eve? It is—twelve," said Bruce, reluctantly, taking out his watch and pretending to examine it beneath the light of the street lamp.

"Oh, no!" said the girl in a horrified tone. She clasped her hands, and a look of passionate distress darkened her face, and deepened the curves of her beautiful lips. "I forgot everything—the hour, the occasion, the meaning of it all! But we must get home; that is the principal thing now," she exclaimed, turning to him with a pitiful attempt at composure. "What would Lady Janet say if she heard of—of this?" Then another horrible thought striking her: "How shall we get in? The servants will be all asleep."

"That will be right enough. I have a latch-key; but——" he was glancing eagerly around him, and stopped short in his sentence.

"But what?" sharply.

"I confess I don't quite know where we are," he acknowledged with a rather forced laugh that unnerved her even more than his assertion. All at once she seemed to lose faith in him: it was he who had brought her into this scrape, and now he seemed unable to get her out of it. A little swift anger flamed into her eyes, and deadened the sweetness of her lips.

"Come," she said coldly; "we must walk on at all events until we meet someone who can tell us where our home lies."

The mist had cleared away a little, and the stars were coming out in the dark blue vault above them. A light wind arose, and softly buffeted her cheeks as she walked eagerly on, entirely silent. Almost at the end of the street a figure came towards them. It was light here, because of a gas lamp, and they could see the face of him who thus advanced towards them. It was the curate of their aunt's parish—a spare, lean, unprepossessing man, to whom Norah had not been altogether gracious in small ways, having from the commencement of their acquaintance resented a tendency on his part to discover in her certain charms and graces. He was a good man, but, like many of his class, narrow.

He was now hurrying to the side of a dying bed, and as his small eyes fell full on Bruce, and then wandered from him to Norah, he paled and dropped his glance, and, with bent head and an exaggerated pretence of being ignorant of their nearness that served to heighten the hideousness of the situation, passed beyond them into the darkness.

Norah bravely repressed the tears that fought for mastery, but Bruce could feel that she was trembling. Her downcast lids hid her eyes, but he could see that the pretty mobile lips, erstwhile so prone to laughter, were now possessed by melancholy. He smothered an unmentionable word or two that rose to his lips, and were meant for the curate; but to her, to comfort her, he could find nothing to say. That he was passionately grieved for her, his own soul knew, but he could not put that grief into words.

And now the sullen mist that had overlain the town, covering it as with a shroud, was quite all gone, and the stars were twinkling gaily in the sky. The night had grown quite bright, and "there where the moonrise broke the dusky grey," one saw soft luminous clouds that crossed and dimmed the majesty of Dian for the instant, only to leave her fuller of beauty when she stole from beneath their embrace.

They had turned down one street and walked up another. But they did not know where their

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steps were taking them. Two people only they had met, and both were useless. It was horrible, this perpetual going on without any knowledge of the end, and with the ever-increasing desire for somebody who could give them information—that somebody who never came! Again a clock sounded in the distance. It struck the half-hour.

"This is growing too terrible," said Norah, stopping short and pressing her hand to her heart. "It cannot last, or it will kill me. Oh! think of something!"

Even as she spoke, the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps came to them. Norah almost ran to meet them, and presently could see the man to whom they belonged standing out clearly from the intense darkness behind him. And as she saw him, she came to an abrupt standstill, and turned eagerly to Bruce, who had joined her. Her heart seemed to cease beating, and she knew that her face was growing, not only white, but cold. Who was it? What fanciful resemblance was this? Surely Fate could not do her so base a turn! Even as she stood and stared blankly at him, with parted lips and wide, horror-stricken eyes, the figure emerged into the fuller light of the near lamp, and stood revealed as Sir George Blake.

Norah made a sudden retreat—a sharp movement suggestive of the idea, that for a moment she had dwelt upon the possibility of being able to

hide herself behind her companion. Then she conquered the undignified desire, and as a means of proving that she had never intended it, she went ostentatiously forward and confronted Sir George as he stood rigidly upright in the centre of the street. Only for an instant, however, did he so stand: the inexpressible pain he suffered then, was subdued almost as it came to life. He recovered himself wonderfully, before Bruce had time to notice the shock he had sustained, and at all events before Norah had realised the entirety of it. He was ghastly pale, but his voice as he spoke was perfectly under control.

"Ah! so you *too* ventured out to see the ceremonies," he said, addressing himself exclusively to Norah. "Not altogether so good a thing as one had been led to believe. But we have all lived long enough to allow for exaggerations. Are you on your way home?"

"If you can *only* tell us that," said she with a poor attempt at unconcern. She tried to laugh but failed, and was unhappily conscious of her failure. She was miserable, and looked it. "The fact is," she said, breaking down a little, "we have lost our way."

"An awkward time to lose it," returned he with a pale smile.

"So awkward that, if you *can*, I hope you will help us," said Bruce with a frown. He had not

quite liked the manner of Sir George—a manner that had distinctly ignored him.

“Yes, help us,” said Norah in a low tone. Blake saw the dewy brightness of her eyes as she spoke, a brightness that hinted at tears not very far away.

“If you will follow me,” he said coldly, still addressing Norah, “I think I can lead you to a stand where one cab, at least, may be found.”

They followed him as culprits might, and got their cab. That he had asked for no explanation of her extraordinary appearance there, at that hour of the night, struck cold upon the girl's heart. Yes, he had condemned her. Without a word—without giving her a chance of clearing herself he had condemned her! It was hard! He declined a seat in the cab, and went away from the door of it after carefully putting her into it, without a spoken good-night, and with no courtesy indeed beyond the iciest bow and the very faintest lifting of his hat. Her drive home was one of unbroken silence, and when she got safely to her room without rousing a member of the household, she flung herself upon her bed and burst into a passion of tears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Next morning Lady Janet was closeted for a considerable time with a very early visitor, who would take no denial. As he took his departure she rang her bell sharply, and demanded that Miss Blake would come to her *at once*. Miss Blake came;

not without some trepidation, her conscience being anything but calm.

And then it all came out. Lady Janet, in some mysterious fashion, had been made aware of last night's escapade. Her niece had been seen at *midnight* in the streets of Edinburgh with Darnley Bruce. It was horrible, shameful! She declined to say who her informant was; she only asked if the information were true. *Was* it true? She sat in judgment and gazed at the terrified girl with a cruel sternness.

"Yes," said Norah faintly. There was a great deal more she could have said, but if her life had depended upon it then, she could not have framed more than that little damnatory affirmative. The thought that it was George—*George!*—who had betrayed her, was so indescribably bitter, as to render her foolishly dumb.

Lady Janet, too, was apparently deprived of speech by the openness of this small avowal on the girl's part. Only for a short while, however, and when speech returned to her she made good use of it—perhaps to make up for lost time. She stormed, she scolded, she reproached, and through all said very many nasty things.

"If it had been anyone but an engaged man," she said at last, looking at the girl with contemptuous eyes.

"*Engaged!*" The word fell from Norah's lips

with startling rapidity. She looked fixedly at Lady Janet. That she was thoroughly roused now was quite plain to the elder woman.

"Yes, engaged. Did you not know it? Had he not the decency to tell you? He has been engaged for more than a year to a Miss Prendergast, a girl of no family, but with a large fortune. Darnley is a man of expensive tastes, and is bound to marry some one who can help him to gratify them. He could not afford to marry a poor girl."

"You should have told me all this before; you, my guardian for the time being," said Norah, in a choked voice. "It never occurred to me that he was not heart-whole; that there was an honourable reason why he should be regarded as different from other men; men without a tie. To my mind he is as much married as though the words of our church had been read over him."

"Were he married or single there is no excuse for your conduct of last night. Were you *mad* to do such a thing?"

"I am not thinking of last night. I am thinking of all the other days. If he *is* engaged to that girl I am very sorry for her," said Norah slowly. Had her words been brilliantly eloquent she could not have further conveyed to her hearer the depth of her contempt for the man in question. "As for last night—I don't know how it happened. It was wrong, foolish, mad; but I will not admit that I meant any

harm. My sole fault lies in the fact that I deceived you, but even then I thought you would not so very much care if no one knew of it but you and I and Mr. Bruce. It seemed such a simple thing—and—I did not think George would have told you.”

“It was not George!” exclaimed Lady Janet impulsively, and then checked herself; but it was too late. She had explained everything. The curate’s gaunt face rose before Norah, and she told herself she almost knew the very words in which he had told his tale.

“It is a most distressing affair altogether. I’m sure I don’t know how I am to explain it to your mother,” went on Lady Janet presently.

“*That* trouble I can at least spare you,” returned Norah haughtily. “I can go home and explain it to her myself.”

“Well, perhaps that would be the better plan,” said Lady Janet slowly. She rose from her seat as she said this, and as if a little afraid to look at the girl, moved noiselessly from the room.

For a long hour Norah sat there silent, almost motionless, until a step in the ante-room outside compelled her to raise her head, and see that it was Darnley Bruce that had entered the room and was now standing before her. She rose involuntarily.

“My aunt has just told me,” he began, with a little amused air, “that she has been criticising,

somewhat unkindly, our very harmless adventure of last evening. Has her criticism vexed you?"

"Certainly," said Norah gravely.

"Then let it do so no longer. Let us make the impropriety of these prudes—proper." He hesitated and laughed lightly. "If a girl were to walk abroad at any hour with her affianced husband, very little would be said—isn't that so?" he asked, still smiling.

"I don't know," replied Norah, regarding him steadily with large expectant eyes. Unconsciously she afforded him encouragement.

"Place *me* in that position, Norah," said he, quickly. "Tell me that I shall one day be *your* husband." A sudden fervour fell into his usually nonchalant voice. His face changed and grew singularly earnest. The smile died from it.

"*You!*" she said. She looked at him strangely for a minute or so, and then her eyes fell to the ground. "And how about Miss Prendergast?" she went on very gently, her closed lips growing full of meaning. He coloured warmly.

"You have heard, then," he exclaimed, quickly. "That was a folly—a madness I have recovered from."

"She is pretty—an heiress!"

"She is not your equal. And it is all over now. A week ago I wrote to her to—to absolve her from her promise to me."

"A week ago!"

"A full week. And now I am free to wed you, Norah."

Did she shrink from him as he eagerly approached her?

"*Only* a week," she said, raising her hand reflectively to her forehead. "And before that?" Her pause here was so slight, that if he had meant to explain matters, his hesitation in doing so went almost unmarked. "It is all very strange," she finished, with a deep sigh.

"Strange that I should change my fancied admiration for another to my strong love for you? It would have been stranger had I not done so. And now you will take pity on me," said he, smiling fondly. "You will name our wedding day—a *near* day. You will marry me, Norah?"

"Oh! as to that," she answered, gravely; "that is impossible!"

"Impossible!"

"Quite—*quite* so!"

"I don't think I understand," said Bruce, making a strong effort at composure, but growing extremely pale. "Do you mean to tell me that after all that has passed between us you now mean to reject me?"

She looked at him steadily and very coldly.

"After all *what?*" she demanded a little haughtily, her clear eyes darkening.

"After all our happy hours spent together.



Hours in which you drew my heart from out my body and made it yours. Will you destroy that heart?"

"Ah!" she said, gently, "I do not think I shall destroy it. A month ago it was hers: to-day it is mine: to-morrow——" She paused, and ran her slender fingers, with an absent air, along the edge of the antique cabinet near her.

"This is trifling!" cried he, angrily. "I tell you that for your sake I have thrown up fortune, and now you say you will have nothing to do with me. I have given up that other girl to gain you."

"I am sorry for that other girl," replied she, a sudden flash in her eyes.

"You need not," returned he, with a bitter laugh. "Believe me, she requires no commiseration. She was *glad* to be released. She cares for me quite as little as you do."

"I am sorry," she said again, but this time she looked at him, and he could see that there was genuine kindly regret in her glance. It was a glance fatal to his hopes, yet it seemed to moisten his parched soul.

"You will have pity," he entreated, laying his fingers lightly on her arm. "What is it that stands between us? What has that old woman said? What is it you can't forgive?"

"There is nothing—*nothing!*" she declared, eagerly. "I forgive—I don't know even what it is

I have to forgive. It is only"—her voice sank a little and she half turned away—"that now I *know* I could never have loved you. There, *go*," she whispered, hurriedly, a moment later, as steps could be heard outside drawing nearer and nearer to the door. "Go before Lady Janet comes to question, to learn that you—you asked, and I had nothing to give!"

He straightened himself, and with a swift glance at her—a final glance—quitted the room by the upper door. As he did so the lower one was opened and someone came in. After all it was not Lady Janet—it was only Sir George Blake.

Norah started and turned a vivid crimson. It was the first time he and she had met since that terrible moment last night, when she had found herself face to face with him in the middle of the deserted street.

"Lady Janet tells me you are thinking of returning home," he began, hardly looking at her. "I fear she has been unwarrantably severe with you. But it will be wise to make allowances. To go back now in such hot haste to Derrygra seems to me the very height of folly."

"She has left me no alternative," said Norah, making a little impulsive gesture with her right hand, that conveyed the impression that all things had come to an end between her and her hostess. "She was too angry to be reasonable. She was not

so much unwarrantably severe as unpardonably *rude*! Of course, I shall go. Kathleen at least understands me, and mamma always *knows*. I am not afraid of their verdict. As for Lady Janet, she has behaved abominably."

She turned suddenly to him, with her red lips apart and her eyes aglow.

"What was it all but a *mistake*," she cried, passionately. Not for all the world could offer would she have confessed, even to herself, that the desire to clear herself with him was the uppermost thought in her heart. "My mind was so occupied—I was so interested in the people—the scene—the strange weirdness of the effects—that I forgot everything. But," haughtily, "forgetfulness is not a *crime*!"

"No," said he, meditatively, his eyes on the carpet. "And, as you say, you were so interested."

"In the people—the whole scene," she repeated, impatiently. "But Lady Janet would not listen. She herself had so much to say, that she gave me no room to say anything. There are indeed two or three things she said that I shall find it difficult to forget." She drew herself up, and through her soft eyes there shot a flame of undisguised anger.

"She will be sorry for them herself, by and by. I think, perhaps, she is sorry for them even now," said Blake. "Sometimes, too, she speaks of things that are not quite understood by her. Perhaps——"

He hesitated, and then went on: "Perhaps she spoke to you of Bruce's engagement?"

"Yes."

"She does not know the truth about that affair. Bruce is no longer engaged to be married. He has broken off any ties that bound him to Miss Prendergast. He is a free man."

"You have been speaking to him?" said the girl, regarding him fixedly.

"Yes." He looked past her, out of the window, and frowned slightly. "You see," he said slowly, "in a measure I feel bound to look after you—your interests—your *happiness!*" It was with a visible effort he made this speech, yet his voice was unbroken, and his gaze was not lowered.

"It is very good of you," said Norah, a faint inflection of sarcasm in her tone. "And what is it you want to do for me now?"

A short silence followed on her question. Then—

"Bruce loves you," said Sir George slowly. Receiving no answer to this startling assertion, he felt himself bound to look at her, and saw that she was standing motionless upon the hearthrug, her hands clasped before her. She was very pale. To him that loss of colour told its own tale. She did then love Bruce in return, and that foolish pallor was but Nature's tattler that flew to betray her secret!

"Yes, he loves you," he went on, speaking now very rapidly. "He is a man of good position, of

excellent family; he is a man with many friends!" He broke off abruptly, and came a step nearer to her. "I have been assured," he said, "that the dearest wish of his heart is to make you his wife!"

Norah moved as if involuntarily, and raised to his a very pale face wreathed in a cold disdainful smile.

"All that, I know," she said. "He told me everything just before you came in."

Sir George started violently.

"So soon!" he exclaimed. "Then it is all over, and I might, at least, have spared myself—*this*."

"Do not regret it," said she, with an ironical intonation. "You have taught me how elegantly you can plead another's cause."

"I think it was *your* cause I was advocating," returned he, a little wearily. "I had seen Lady Janet, and had listened to her angry remarks about you. I had combated with her prejudices in vain. It occurred to me you must be troubled, distressed, about all this, and then a way out of your difficulty presented itself to me. I knew how he loved you; I guessed how you loved him. I at once felt that an engagement between you would simplify all things. I knew, too——"

"What a great deal you seem to know!" interrupted she contemptuously. "Even a great deal more than what actually *is*. As for me, I do not love, and I shall never marry Mr. Bruce. He quite

understands that. He is gone. It is unlikely I shall ever see him again."

"You *refused* him?"

"Yes, yes! Why will you make me repeat it," cried she with some suppressed vehemence.

For a long time neither of them spoke. Then she raised her head and sighed heavily. She turned her eyes to his.

"Will you leave me," she murmured in her gentlest tone.

He rose at once to obey her.

"You *meant* to be kind, I suppose—I *believe*," she said, in a low voice. "And I thank you. But you have given me many things to think of, and—I would wish to be alone!"

He moved away from her down the room, but as he got to the door he paused and looked back at her, his hand upon the handle.

"If you won't marry him, will you marry me?" he said.

She let her arms fall to her sides.

"Oh! George," she cried.

"Well?" said he, looking at her. Perhaps what he saw decided him, because he dropped the handle of the door and went back to her.

"Well?" he said again, but in a very different voice this time, being now in full possession of her trembling hands.

"I know I shouldn't have been there last night,"

she confessed humbly. "But I did so want to know what it was all about."

"And now you know," said he. She blushed hotly beneath his grave glance and the indirect meaning of his words.

"Yes; I know——" she murmured. "And after all it wasn't so *very* much. I didn't care about it. You will believe *that*?"

"I will," said he tenderly. "I understand *all*. And as you say there was nothing so very much in it after all."

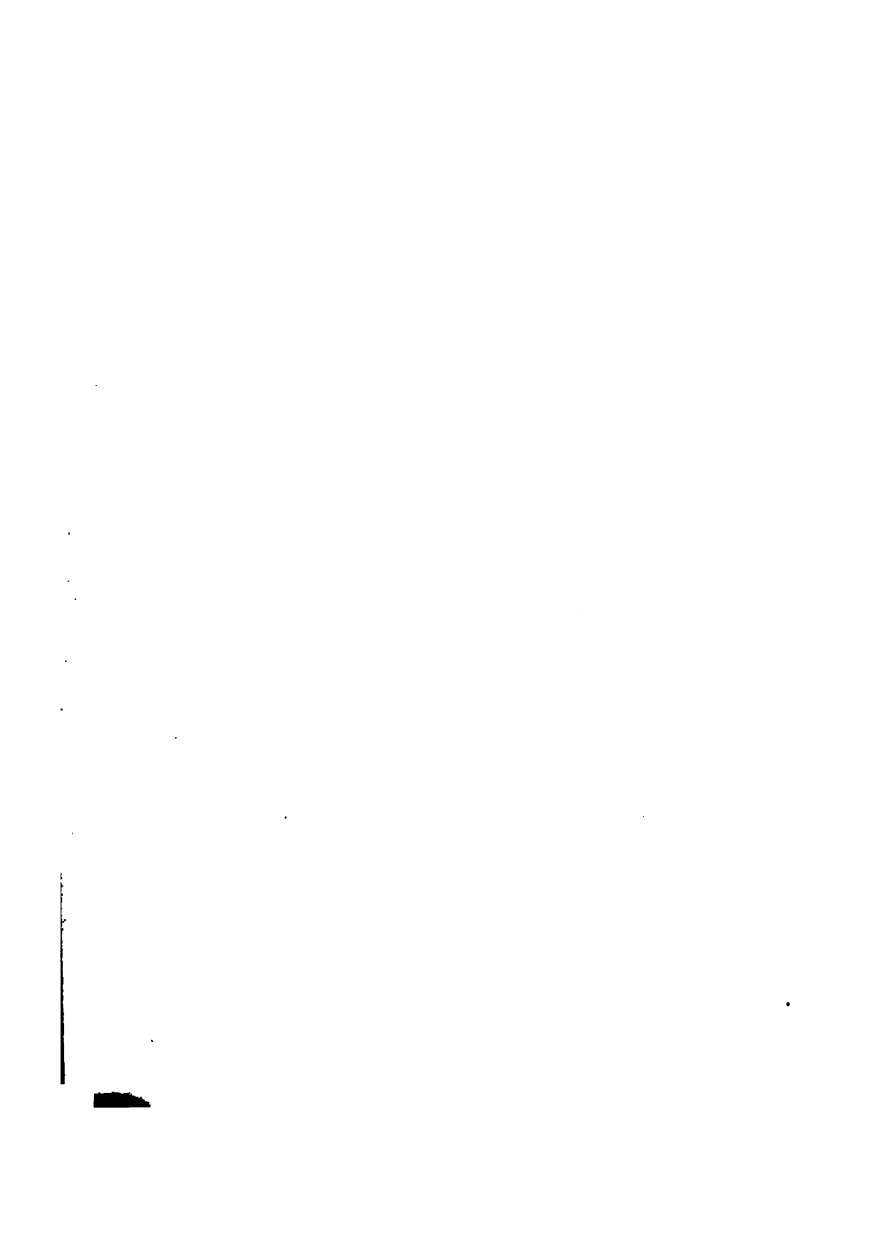
"Still I should not have gone," whispered she penitently, lifting to his face lovely, plaintive eyes. "It was wrong of me, *very* wrong. Think, George! Consider *well* what I have done. The world is sometimes unkind, and what will people say?"

"That is my affair," said George Blake, as he bent down and sealed his forgiveness with a kiss.

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V I V I E N N E.





## VIVIENNE.

SHE was, without doubt, the prettiest girl in all the country round—small and slight, and beautifully made, and of a nature the most loveable. Imagine a face that possesses no colour except when its owner blushes, but is fair and calm and sweet as a summer evening, with large brown eyes that frown, and smile, and sparkle, and show in a thousand ways the character of the girl.

Her mother, the Honourable Mrs. De Vere, left a widow two years after Vivienne's birth, clung to the child with passionate intensity, and spent her life endeavouring to shield her from all those little griefs and troubles that beset the path of childhood. And so far she had fully succeeded; for although, at the time I write of, Vivienne had passed her twenty-second birthday, she still retained, both in mind and manner, all that careless gaiety and freshness which belong alone to extreme youth; in fact, a complete system of perfect spoiling had left her, as she now was, the most impulsive, the most pas-

sionate, and withal the most perfect darling—to my eyes—this world has ever seen.

Just a few brief words about myself, and then I will continue my story.

My name is Guy Hamilton, and I am Vivienne's cousin—about three years, perhaps, her senior. At a very early age I lost both father and mother; indeed, so young was I, that I have not the slightest recollection of either of them; and, my guardians having desired that my education should be carried on abroad, I saw very little of any of my relations until my return to England, on the event of my coming of age.

Arrived in London, and being well known as the possessor of considerable estates, I was speedily admitted within the circles of the best society; and here for the first time I beheld my cousin Vivienne.

Flushed and sparkling with the triumphs of a first London season, she seemed to my enraptured sight the personification of all things lovely. I was her willing slave upon the spot; and from that moment until now she has been, and always will be, to me, the one woman upon earth.

The county in which we resided was generally very gay, much given to balls, croquet parties, picnics, &c., and with some of the finest hunting and shooting to be found in England. But somehow of late very few balls had enlivened our vicinity, some families being in mourning, some having gone

abroad, and others having excellent reasons of their own for indulging in a quiet season.

It was now September, the summer being almost gone, though enough of its sweetness remained to remind us of what we had lost, and Vivienne, her mother, and I were standing one day on the terrace, overlooking the garden below, when our eyes were attracted by the appearance of a mounted groom riding slowly up the avenue.

"The Castle March groom," cried Vivienne; "run, Guy, and see what message he brings from Flora."

I ran down, and, confronting the man, received from him a tiny note in Lady March's handwriting, which I flourished triumphantly on my way back.

"An invitation," cried I, with mock enthusiasm—"an invitation—I'd swear to the envelope;" and I held the letter at a very respectful distance from me, while I gazed with reverence at its soft pink cover.

"Nonsense!" Vivienne said, the little face flushing; "it is a great deal too early in the season for any ball, and you know she hates morning parties; but—will you give it to me, Guy, you torment?"

"What will you bet, then?" insisted I, still holding the letter high above my head, simply for the sake of seeing her try to reach it; "in gloves, for instance—half a dozen, or a dozen?"

"Half a dozen that it is no invitation," she said,

and I gave her the letter. She opened it impatiently, glanced through it, and then read aloud—

“Dearest Viv.—We have at last decided to give a ball on the 30th—that is, before Blanche leaves us, to reconcile her to our parting; so get up your prettiest dress, and do try to make your ugly little self look lovely if you can. Love to the mother and Guy, who, of course, will both come to take care of you; and tell the latter that I have just got down some extra capital champagne, expressly for his use.—In awful haste, ever yours,

“FLO.”

“The darling!” said Vivienne, clapping her hands with delight, as she finished the letter. “Oh, I’m so glad. What dress shall I wear mamma? I think I’ll go and make my choice,” and she turned towards the house.

“I hope you don’t forget that you owe me half a dozen pair of gloves,” cried I, as she sprang through the low French window into the drawing-room; “but——”

“Don’t you wish you may get them?” sounded strangely like the answer I received, as she disappeared within the house. And here I think it only justice to myself to add that I never did get them.

In her hurry when leaving Vivienne had dropped

the letter, and it fluttered to my feet; mechanically I stooped to pick it up, and, carelessly turning the page, I perceived a postscript written at the other side. It ran as follows:—

“P.S. I very nearly despatched this without telling you that my brother Cecil—my favourite brother, you know—will arrive here on the 29th, delightfully bronzed, and altogether decidedly Indian, I hope. In fact, I picture him, in my own mind, as quite a hero for my ball.—Yours, F. M.”

I followed Vivienne, and, showing her the letter, whispered jestingly that this perhaps would prove another lover to add to her long list; but all the time upon my heart most heavily there lay a sad and unaccountable misgiving.

\* \* \* \*

The Castle March ball-room was by far the handsomest room in the county, and on this particular night of which I write was crowded almost to inconvenience both with rank and beauty; but Vivienne, with her bright bewitching loveliness, was undoubtedly the belle of it.

After the first waltz, which she danced with me, was ended, I resigned her—reluctantly be it said—to the arms of a young squire, and went to do a few duty dances at the top of the room.

An hour passed thus, and, having charitably spent this time endeavouring to persuade three antiquated damsels that theirs was the style of beauty

I particularly affected, I began to think that I might once more claim a dance from Vivienne, and forthwith commenced a slow though eager search all through the room, looking for the little form so dear to me.

At last, in the embrasure of a window I beheld her, flushing and lighting up with animation as she talked with a dark and very handsome man, who, standing beside her, leant negligently against the side of the window, which opened to the ground. He was speaking, and both in look and tone there was evident admiration.

"So I am quite forgotten, Miss De Vere," he said. "Well, I think that a little too hard, considering that I once had the honour of saving you from a heavy fall from an apple-tree, when you were about so high," placing his hand not quite a yard from the ground. She laughed.

"I never should have known you," she said—"you are so changed; and then, remember, it is such a number of years. Why, at that time I was only a mere child; and now——" she paused.

"Well, and now?" he asked.

"Oh, now," she answered archly, "I am quite an old maid, you know; and, considering how age does dim the sight, I surely may be forgiven a little forgetfulness."

"An 'old maid,' are you?" he said, ignoring the latter part of her sentence. "Well, all I can say is

I never saw an 'old maid' before. Shall we finish this waltz?" and he moved a little forward as he spoke.

She also rose, and, turning up her large brown eyes to his with an expression half shy, half laughing, lurking in the soft darkness of their depths, she murmured gaily—

"You will understand—without telling—that I hate flattery in any form—in fact, it always rouses within me every particle of the bad humour I possess—no small share I can tell you; but that last little compliment of yours was so charmingly disguised, that really, on the whole, I rather think I liked it—there!"

"Did you?" he whispered softly, passing his arm round her waist, and bending low to look into her face. "I am glad of that; but I would far rather you liked me;" and then they moved away, and were lost amongst the throng of dancers.

He is very like his sister, I thought sadly, as I passed over with difficulty and by slow degrees to the other side of the room, where some half dozen men of my acquaintance stood discussing the girls and the dancing.

Handcock of the 14th was holding forth as I came up to them, and the subject on which he was enlarging arrested my attention in a moment.

"How lovely Miss De Vere is looking this evening!" he was saying. "That scarlet in her hair is awfully becoming."



"Ah, show her to me," said one of a new set of fellows who had only arrived at the barracks a few days before, and consequently knew little or nothing of the neighbourhood, pushing forward eagerly as he spoke—"that's the girl who has refused the entire county, isn't it?"

"Pretty nearly," returned Handcock, who, as report went, had been very hard hit himself in that quarter. "Look, there she is, all in white, with the scarlet geranium in her hair. Do you admire her?"

"Admire her?" answered the other, with a hearty burst of enthusiasm. "Egad, I should rather think I do; why, she is perfectly lovely. Who is the fellow dancing with her?"

"Captain Verschoyle," I said, slowly, perceiving they were at a loss for an answer.

"Verschoyle, did you say?" exclaimed a fair, sinister-looking man, whom I had not perceived before, but who now came quietly to the front of the group. "Cecil Verschoyle? Ah, by Jove, yes; I knew him in India. When did he return?" appealing to me.

"He arrived here yesterday, I believe," I said. "He is come home on leave; the climate was destroying his health."

"Ah, yes," he returned slowly, and a cold, sneering expression crept up over his face; "yes, I should think he did find the climate rather warm—not to

be wondered at, considering the name he made for himself out there."

"A name?" lisped a young ensign. "Lucky dog! Wish to Heaven I could make myself a name! How did he do it?"

"In a way that I don't envy, and that I wouldn't advise you to go in for," the other answered coldly. "I wasn't on the spot myself—only heard it from some other fellows. It was a bad business altogether—running away with the major's wife being the principal feature in it, I believe. It created an awful sensation, I can tell you; and what added to it was the tragical end of the story, the woman herself dying three days after the elopement. Mind," he went on, looking round, and seeing the expression on our faces, "I cannot vouch for the exact truth, not being myself an eye-witness. I was only told it by others; and such things are better kept dark." With which wholesome advice he turned and left us.

I thought in my own mind that, if such was his opinion, an open ball-room was hardly the place in which to discuss it; and, looking across the room at the handsome, open, and thoroughly well-bred face before me, I could not in my heart connect it with the story I had just heard.

The man had reasons of his own, I concluded—mean, pitiful ones they must have been—for wishing to blast Verschoyle's reputation in the eyes of

the world; and if so—— but here Handcock broke in upon my meditation.

“An ugly story,” he said, “and one made uglier by the telling. In my opinion the fellow who could, in an open ball-room, tell a story so calculated to ruin the character of any man, must be at heart a blackguard.”

I acquiesced with a nod, and two hours later, the ball having broken up, we went home.

On the Friday morning following (Wednesday had been the night of the ball) Captain Verschoyle called, and paid us what seemed to me an unconscionably long visit. Before leaving, he arranged a riding party, to take place the next day, to see some ruins a few miles off. On Sunday he accompanied us home from church—Monday he called again; and so on for a month—never a day passed without bringing Cecil’s handsome horse and his rider to our door.

His coming—I saw at last—was Vivienne’s heaven, his voice beyond all music to her ear, and in her eyes I read that she at length loved him, with all the passionate tenderness of her most loving nature.

“So ran the world away,” and it was a day towards the close of October, warm and bright as the middle of June—what is commonly called a “pet day”—and Vivienne, taking advantage of the weather, had driven over in the morning to see the Laytons,

some friends of hers, but had signified her intention, before leaving, of being home to luncheon; and I, having nothing better to do, strolled out with dog and gun to get a stray shot at a partridge.

However, the birds proving shy, or being myself in no humour for shooting, after about two hours' ramble I turned slowly homewards, and, entering the low French window of the drawing-room, I flung myself on a couch half hidden from the room by falling draperies.

Tired out, far more in mind perhaps than in body, I had lain there for about half an hour or more, when the door opened suddenly, and Verschoyle entered, but without perceiving me; and, as I was in no mood for talking, but on the contrary very much disinclined for it, I made no sign, but lay as I was, half asleep from the heat of the weather and my own dull thoughts.

I think I must have dozed, for the next thing I remember hearing was Vivienne's voice in the hall, and Verschoyle starting to his feet from the large arm-chair in which he was lounging, with an exclamation of pleasure, and a smile that made his handsome face still handsomer.

In another moment she was before me, and Verschoyle met her in the centre of the room.

"Come at last, darling," he said gaily. "You cannot fancy the relief to my feelings, as I was

quite certain young Layton had eloped with you," and he stooped to kiss her.

But at the word "elope" Vivienne's face had darkened, and now, putting her hand suddenly against his breast, she drew herself back from the proffered embrace, thus by the action revealing at once that something unusual had happened.

"Vivienne," Verschoyle said hurriedly, "Vivienne, my dearest, what is it?" and as he spoke he placed his own hand over the tiny gloved one, still lying so heavily upon his chest.

Glancing at her face, I could see that it was as white as death, and that her eyes shone dangerously; but her voice was low and steady, and the quivering of her lips alone showed how deeply she was agitated, and how rapidly her breath both came and went.

"About India," she said—"I have heard all that story. Answer me, Cecil, answer me: is there one word of truth about you and Mrs. Grey?"

"Who has dared," Verschoyle broke in fiercely, as his face flushed a deep red and a heavy frown crept over it—"who has dared to poison——"

"That is not the question," she interrupted quickly, speaking low, but vehemently. "I will have 'Yes' or 'No.' Was there any story about you and that woman?"

"Yes," he answered. "But listen to me, Vivienne, for one moment. You cannot understand—let me

explain;" and both his voice and manner grew passionately imploring.

But it was too late; the unlucky admission on his part had roused within her breast all the passion of her nature, and, starting violently back as though stung, she cried bitterly—

"‘Yes’—is that your answer? Good Heavens! what fools some women are! And you have dared to say you love me—have asked me to be your wife—have kissed me!"

"Great Heaven!" he entreated, still holding her little hand tightly between his own, "won't you listen to me, Vivienne? For my sake, for both our sakes, hear me now."

But she resolutely drew her hand away, and, raising herself to her full height, said coldly—

"Hush!—not another word;" then moving a little to one side, she drew back the skirts of her dress with a movement at once cold and decisive, and so left open his passage to the door.

The action without the words was in itself sufficient, more than if she had spoken volumes; and, seeing it, he accepted his fate without further pleading. For one moment—a second perhaps—he looked as if he would have spoken, then simply bowed, and walked haughtily out of the room. For such I felt at once was the spirit of the man, that he would not sue a second time for mercy even from the woman for whom his heart was breaking.

Vivienne never stirred from the position in which he had left her, until the closing of the hall door told her that he was indeed gone, and for ever; then she raised her head, and oh the look of hopeless misery on her sweet young face! I could not bear it; and, springing forward, I caught her in my arms and pressed her dear head close down upon my breast.

"My darling," I gasped, "for the love of Heaven, don't look like that. Think of your mother. There may be some happiness for you yet;" and so on, a few passionate words I murmured, feeling all the time that they were falling on deaf ears. It seemed to occasion her no surprise, my sudden appearance there at that moment; she only clung to me a little wildly for a minute or so, and then said wearily—

"He is gone, Guy—I shall never see him again!" and so turned to leave the room.

She went a few yards, then paused, and, coming back to me—

"Dear Guy," she said, with a little faint attempt at a smile, infinitely sadder to me than all the tears that could be shed, and, putting her arms around my neck, she drew down my face to hers, and kissed me, and so went quietly away.

From that day Verschoyle's visits ceased, and his name was never mentioned amongst us—from

which I concluded that Vivienne had told her mother the entire story.

Mrs. De Vere looked troubled and careworn, and followed her daughter's every motion with eyes full of tender love and pity; while the poor child went about her usual daily occupations, never omitting a single duty, never forgetting or neglecting, but always with the same sad and lonely look upon her face.

She read, she walked, she superintended her garden, she fed her swans; at times she was even cheerful; but she never laughed, and very seldom smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was Tuesday evening—that is, the evening of the day, one week back, on which Vivienne and her lover had parted—and, being chilly, we three were sitting round the fire in the drawing-room discussing my departure to my own home, which was to take place on the following day—for the poachers had become troublesome, and my steward required my presence for many reasons—when a bustle and noise were heard in the hall, and, the door opening suddenly, Cummins, Lady Flora's maid, came hurriedly into the room. She seemed much agitated, and her eyes were red, as if from excessive weeping.

"Oh, ma'am," she began, hysterically, when Vivienne sprang to her feet, crying, "Cecil!" with



pallid lips, and in a despairing tone, showing—Heaven help her, poor girl!—the one thought that occupied her mind from morning until night.

“Oh, Miss De Vere,” Cummins went on, turning at once towards Vivienne, “Mr. Cecil—the Captain—about four hours ago, riding by Horts Wood, the poachers fired at him, and it seems——”

He is not dead?” Vivienne moaned, interrupting her.

“They mistook him for some one else,” the woman went on, never heeding her question, and weeping bitterly all the time. “The ball entered his side, ma’am, and——”

Down came Vivienne’s little white hand heavily on her shoulder, shaking her roughly.

“He is not dead; speak—speak!” she cried, fiercely, almost mad from suspense.

“No, miss,” Cummins answered, turning quickly round, and frightened by the girl’s face into speaking concisely, “but the doctor says there is no hope, and he has been calling for you, miss, for the last half-hour, and please ’em, my lady says——”

But what my lady had or had not said was quite lost on me, as Vivienne suddenly left the room, and I followed quickly to order the carriage, knowing well that her intention was to reach poor Cecil’s side without a moment’s delay.

Returning to the drawing-room a few minutes afterwards, I found Vivienne there before me, a dark

shawl thrown over her white dress, and both her hands clasped within her mother's; so they both stood, neither of them speaking until, the carriage being announced, I took her down and put her into it.

Giving the word to the coachman, I sprang in after her, and, Cummins sitting opposite, we set out in silence for the Castle. The distance was but a short one, about half an hour's drive perhaps, but I pray Heaven I may never again in all my life spend such a thirty minutes.

When at last we did arrive, we found the door wide open, and Vivienne, springing to the ground, without waiting for any assistance, ran up the steps and entered the hall, which was but dimly lighted and quite deserted, having over it that indescribable look of desolation and gloom which too surely betokens the approach of death.

Throwing her shawl on the ground, Vivienne continued her way up the stairs, while I followed a few yards behind, and on the first landing came face to face with the old doctor of the district, who attended all the families for miles around, and had known her from her birth.

"My dear," he said, speaking slowly and kindly, and putting both his hands upon her shoulders, "I cannot allow any excitement; it will only increase the suffering, and can do no good."

"You need have no fear for me," she said, in a

quiet, self-possessed tone; and, seeing the calm expression of her face, he gave a satisfied nod, and took her across the landing to the door of the chamber.

But here her courage failed her, and, turning to him, she caught his arm, whispering piteously—

“His face?”

“Is quite uninjured,” he made answer, understanding her question at once. “Take courage, child;” and, opening the door of the room, he motioned her to pass through.

As he was about to follow, I stopped him, and asked, hesitatingly—

“How long?”

“Perhaps four hours—perhaps only two,” he replied, with a mournful shake of the head; and then we two passed into the apartment where Cecil Verschoyle lay, surely dying.

What Vivienne first saw was Lady Flora kneeling by the side of the bed, her lips pressed to her brother’s hand, which hung slightly over the edge of it; but, seeing Vivienne, she rose, and tottered to the other side of the room, where Lord March received her in his arms.

Cecil was lying with closed eyes, his face deadly pale, and seemingly in a deep lethargy when we entered; but Vivienne’s approaching step aroused him, and, languidly opening his eyes, now growing dim with the sad touch of death, a glad smile of recognition overspread his face, and—

"My darling," he cried, faintly, stretching out his hand—"my darling, I knew that you would come."

"Oh, Cecil, Cecil, that this should be our meeting!" poor Vivienne moaned, leaning over him and pressing her lips passionately to his.

"I am glad you are come so soon," Verschoyle went on, his eyes brightening as he spoke; "because I could not die or be at rest, until with my own lips I had told you all the fatal story that separated us."

"Hush, Cecil, hush, my dearest," Vivienne said; "I want no explanations now—I only want your forgiveness for ever having doubted you."

"Vivienne," he said, slowly and impressively, "when I tell you that I can have neither peace nor happiness until I have told you this story, I am sure you will listen to me, my dear." He paused for a moment, with a faint gasp for breath, and then continued,

"I saw a good deal of her in India, more perhaps than was usual, but she had no friends out there except myself and her husband. Well, he is dead now, but this I must say, that for the year I saw them together only one word could express his conduct, and that is—brutal. She bore it all in silence, poor little woman, being naturally timid and unaccustomed to harsh treatment; but one day—it was in the presence of somebody—he struck her

savagely across the mouth, and this, even for her meek spirit, proved too much.

"Having no relation that she could appeal to in that foreign country, where she was far away from home and friends, she came to me and begged me for Heaven's sake, and on her bended knees, to take her to Colonel Kearney, who lived about two hundred miles up the country, and whose wife she had known in happier days. Of course I raised her from the ground, promising to do all she wished in this unhappy business, and left her for the time to obtain leave of absence for a few days. This was easily procured, and that very evening she came away with me secretly, not daring to let anyone know of her resolution.

"That, I remember well, was Monday evening; on Tuesday, passing through a village, she caught the cholera, which was raging in the place; and on Wednesday she was dead."

Here he ceased, his voice failing from exhaustion and intense emotion, but presently he whispered—

"This is the entire story—you believe me, Vivienne?"

"Yes," was all she answered, and for some little time there was silence in the room.

At last he broke it, turning slightly towards her and speaking very painfully and sadly.

"I am dying, Vivienne—dying. I feel it, my darling. It is very young to die, is it not?—when

I am only twenty-nine, and we might have been so happy together, you and I."

No answer from Vivienne, save the tightening of her hand on his, and a low choking sob that told but too plainly of the blank despair fast settling down upon her heart.

Verschoyle spoke again, hurriedly.

"Vivienne, my own, you must promise not to grieve too much for me when I am gone. Promise me that when the first great grief is over you will cease to think of me with sadness; though still," he added with a little wistful smile, "I would not wish that you should quite forget me."

"Oh, Cecil, don't!" she cried suddenly, with bitter pain. "Oh, my darling! my darling! is there nothing I can do to keep you with me? Am I quite powerless? Can nothing be done to save you?"

"Nothing," Verschoyle answered, subduing her in a moment by the utter calmness and resignation of his tone. "You must only try to remember, as I do, that all things are ordered in love and mercy."

Again there was silence in the room, broken only by the irregular and laboured breathing of poor Cecil, and an occasional sob of utter despair from Vivienne.

About half an hour was passed thus, and it must have told fearfully on Verschoyle, for when next he spoke his voice was much changed. All life seemed

gone from it; and it was almost in a whisper that he murmured—

“Raise my head a little higher, Vivienne, and brush my hair from my forehead; I feel so tired—so tired.”

Gently and lovingly she passed her hand beneath his neck, and, raising his head, placed it with great tenderness upon her bosom. A smile of almost perfect happiness, although mingled with much sorrow, illumined his face for a moment, and—

“Kiss me,” he said, softly.

With a sigh she stooped and kissed him, and presently he went on.

“Poor Flora! she, I know, will miss me greatly. My poor little sister! But I leave her to you, Vivienne, my own, to cheer and comfort her, when I am gone.”

“And who in all this world can cheer or comfort me?” she cried, passionately, bending and laying her fair round cheek to his.

Another hour passed slowly, an hour of smothered agony and intense stillness, his head reclining on her bosom, and she with both her arms clasped closely round his neck, as though by her feeble grasp to shield and keep him from the inevitable.

At length, when suspense was becoming unbearable, he opened his eyes, and gazing wildly round for a moment, whispered anxiously—

“Vivienne, are you still with me? You have

not left me, my darling? How dark it has grown! Put your face close to mine, that I may once more see the eyes I love so well. Hush, hush, my sweet! don't sob like that. Kiss me once again, and say good night, and so may Heaven ever guard and keep you, my only love."

These were the last words he ever uttered. A little time after that, glancing towards the bed, I saw that his face had changed terribly; and turning anxiously towards the doctor, I found that he too had perceived it, and was hurrying swiftly and noiselessly across the room.

He bent over the bed; and, seeing him, Vivienne put up her hand with a warning gesture.

"Hush, you will wake him," she said; "and he is sleeping so peacefully now."

The doctor turned and motioned me to come to him, shaking his head mournfully the while; by which I knew at once that poor Verschoyle could no longer be numbered amongst the living.

"Vivienne," said I, taking her by the hand, "come with me, my dear."

"No, no, Guy," she answered, "I cannot leave him now. If he should wake and find me gone——"

"Oh, Vivienne," I whispered, in despair, "cannot you understand?"

For a moment she gazed at me wildly, then turned her eyes slowly on poor Cecil's face, and the



next instant she lay as if dead within my arms, and so I carried her from the room.

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I opened my desk this afternoon, and, taking from it the foregoing manuscript (written just two years ago last autumn), I read it every word. It is dusk when I have finished reading, and, turning to the fire, I sit, slowly pondering many things.

Presently the door opens quietly, and Vivienne enters the room; she is a little slighter, a little paler, a little sadder perhaps, but to me as lovely as of old. She comes across to the fireplace, and, kneeling on the rug—

“It is cold,” she says, and holds her hands up to the blazing heat.

Still pondering, I take one of the little hands between my own, and, as is my usual habit when they are cold, chafe it softly and lovingly. In a minute or two she sits down on the carpet altogether in her old cosy fashion, and leans her head against my knee.

I place one arm round her neck, still holding her hand in mine, and then I put into words slowly and earnestly all that I have been thinking.

“Vivienne, I know that you can never love me as you loved him; but this I also know, that your friendship is more to me than the love of any other woman, and I think that I could make you happy.

My darling, I need not say how much I love you, for that you know already; but I ask you now to be my wife, and if your answer should be 'Yes,' then I can ask from Heaven no higher happiness on earth; but if it should be 'No,' then I will bid you, your mother, and old England a long farewell, and try to find some peace in a distant land. So now, Vivienne, give me my answer."

But she gives me no answer—neither word, nor look, nor sign, though I wait for many minutes, silently hoping against hope; and at last I continue—

"Well, then, I will go."

"No, no, Guy!" she cries, suddenly, breaking into bitter tears—"you must not leave me! Whom have I in all the world but you and mamma? And, losing one, how can I like——"

"Hush, hush, my darling!" I implored, hurriedly. "I will not go. It was unmanly of me so to threaten you. There, I swear I will not leave England; but you must let me go to my own home for a few months, until I can come back calmly to my little sister without any fear of troubling her as I have troubled her just now; though, Heaven knows, Vivienne, I would not willingly pain you, my dear; so to-morrow I will take a kiss, and bid you good-bye, and return to you again after a little time."

"Nay, Guy," she says, softly, raising herself quietly, and putting her arms around my neck, "if

it will make you happy, take the kiss now, and stay with us for ever."

And so, in perfect peace, I hold my own within my arms at last—at last.

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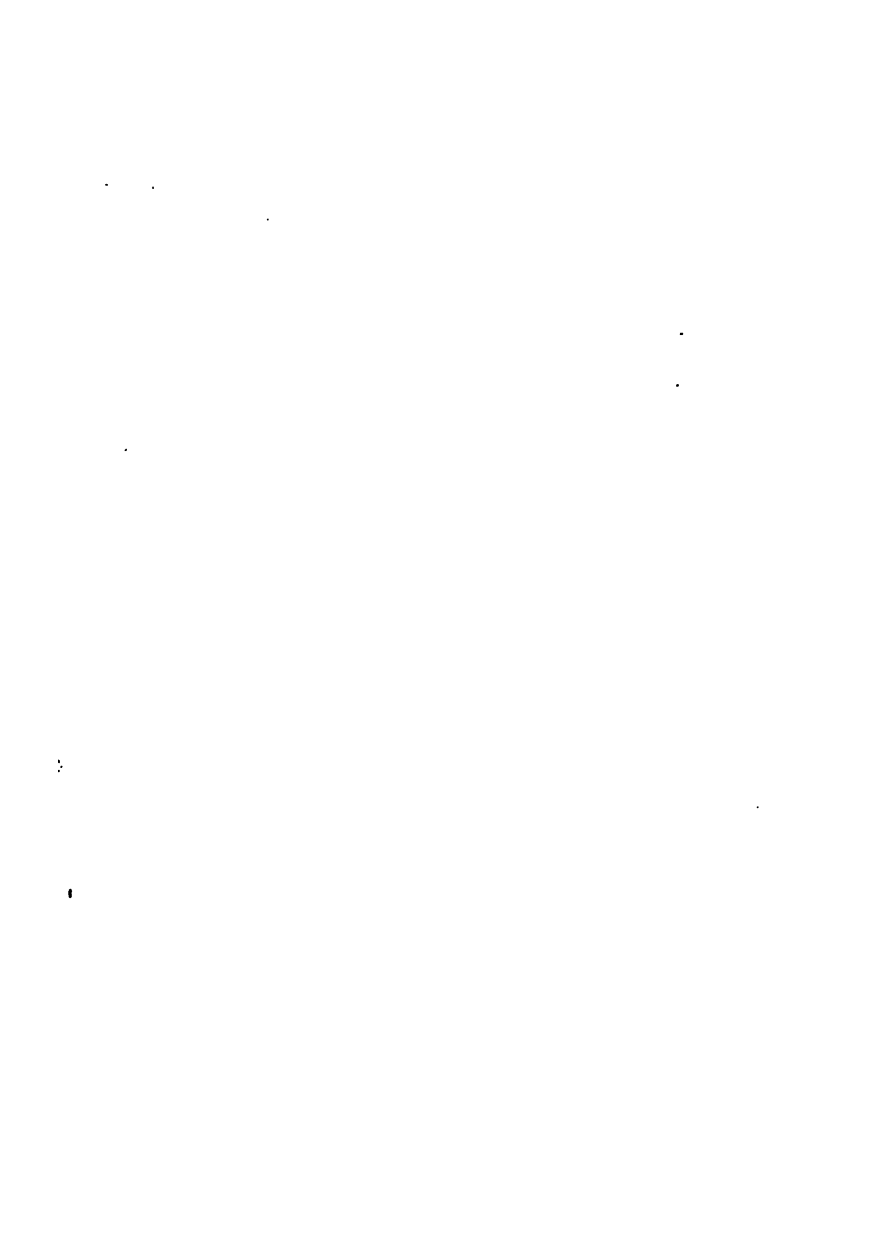
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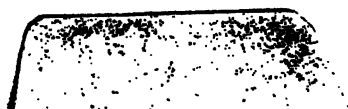
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